A PANORAMA OF THEATRE IN INDIA

SOM BENEGAL

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THEATRE IN INDIA

INDIAN COUNCIL FOR CULTURAL RELATIONS
POPULAR PRAKASHAN

First published
1968/1889

Set in Times Roman 12 point Linotype face

Printed in India

Published by
G. R. Bhatkal
for Popular Prakashan
35C, Tardeo Road
Bombay 34 WB

Printed by
Mohan G. Shirali
at Mohan Mudranalaya
Acme Estate, Sewri (East)
Bombay 15 DD

Preface

THIS LITTLE BOOK on theatre in India makes no claim to any scholarship nor is it meant to be definitive. It is a somewhat bold outline, intended chiefly for those who have neither the time nor the inclination to go too deeply into an otherwise complex and fascinating subject. If it also acts on some as an aperitif, as it were, toward a more substantial meal of Indian drama my labours would be additionally rewarded.

The number of scholarly works on classical Indian drama is legion. They also offer in addition to much erudition a bewildering diversity of opinion and interpretation. But a distressing fact is that as we get closer to contemporary times the number of works thins out. This may be partly because the shortened historical perspective, whereby by a peculiar inversion the past seems to dwarf the present, has discouraged research and scholarship. This may also be partly because with eclipse of the Sanskrit theatre and a pause of several centuries, a contemporary revival or regeneration appears to be painful and slow in the coming. I refer, of course, to what might be called the legitimate, "sophisticated" urban theatre. Folk theatre, on the other hand, has

survived both the challenge of time and the vicissitudes of changing regimes and flourishes, even if not with the same vigour as of old. But folk theatre is not within my scope and has exhaustively been dealt with separately by another author in this series.

Not the least of my other difficulties in dealing with the contemporary scene has been the seeming indifference of many of the various personalities in providing me with any meaningful material. Perhaps their multitudinous preoccupations deterred them; perhaps correspondence is not the best way of collecting material but there was no other choice.

Scholarly works abound, popular narrations are few. Being a popular essay I have not burdened it with scholarly references, not even in footnotes. But those whose interest has been aroused will find in the bibliography at the end the various works which have been read or consulted, or which where I have not read them, I believe, might be worth reading.

I would like warmly to thank Dr Mulk Raj Anand, Mr Prithwish Neogy, Mr Girilal Jain and Mr Sitaram Goel for their instructive discussions with me; the Indian Council for Cultural Relations for inviting me to write this aperçu; in a larger sense I must thank Mrs Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, for it is her sustained interest, encouragement and inspiration that has fully committed me to the theatre movement. To many friends and professional colleagues I owe gratitude for their encouragement, and assistance in numerous important details. And finally I must also thank Mr R. A. Poduval for undertaking the thankless task of typing my manuscript through its several stages, and helping me in many other ways.

New Delhi
December, 1967

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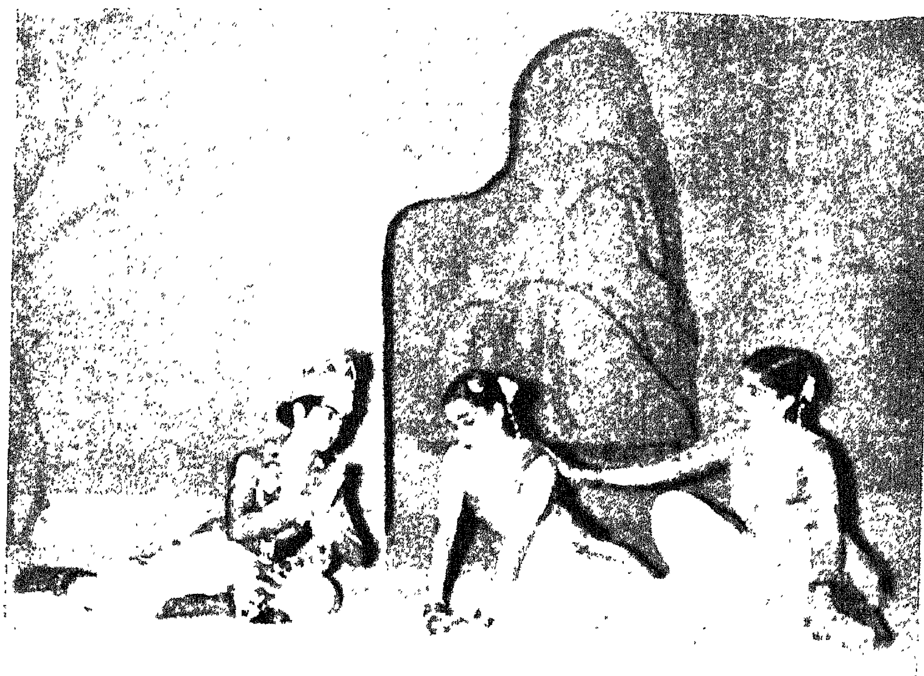
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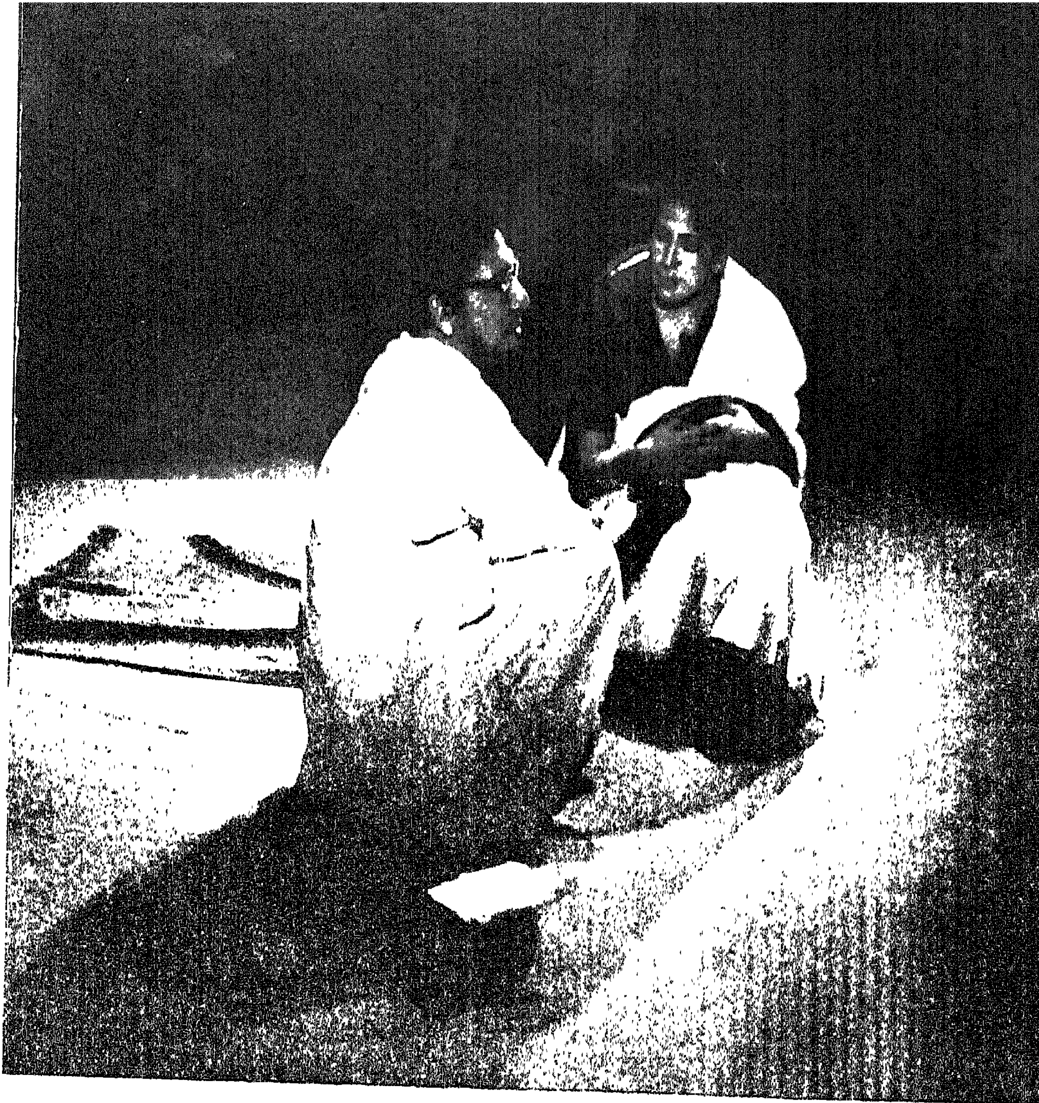
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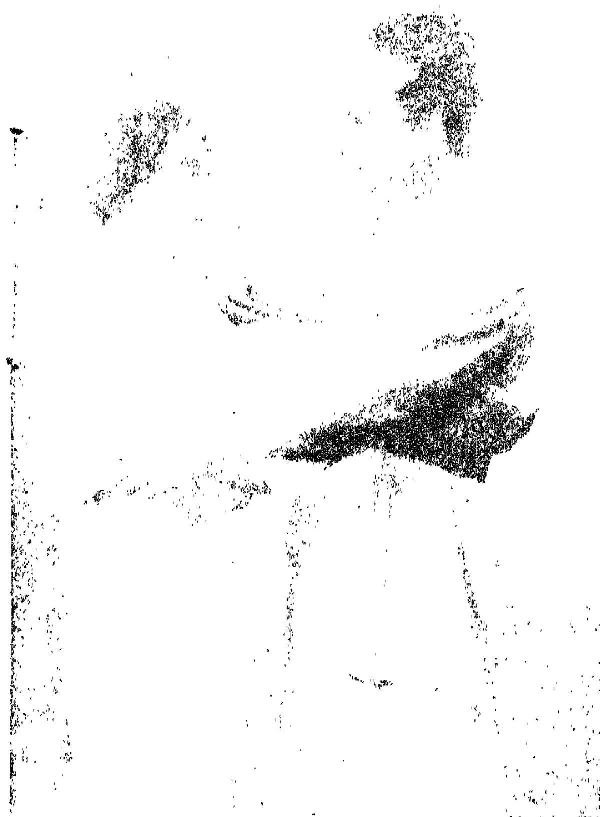
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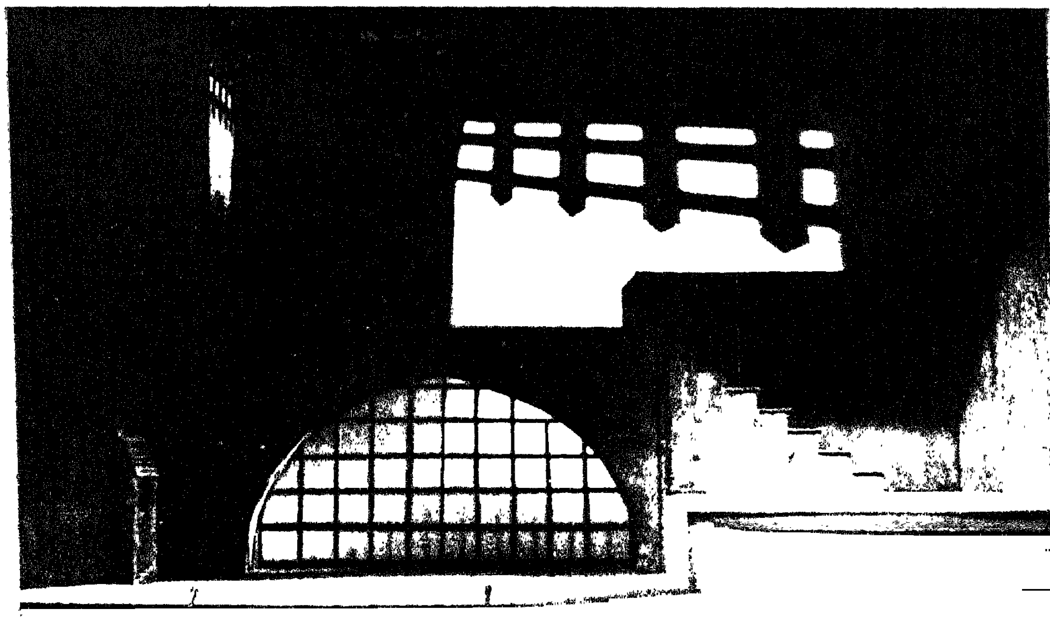


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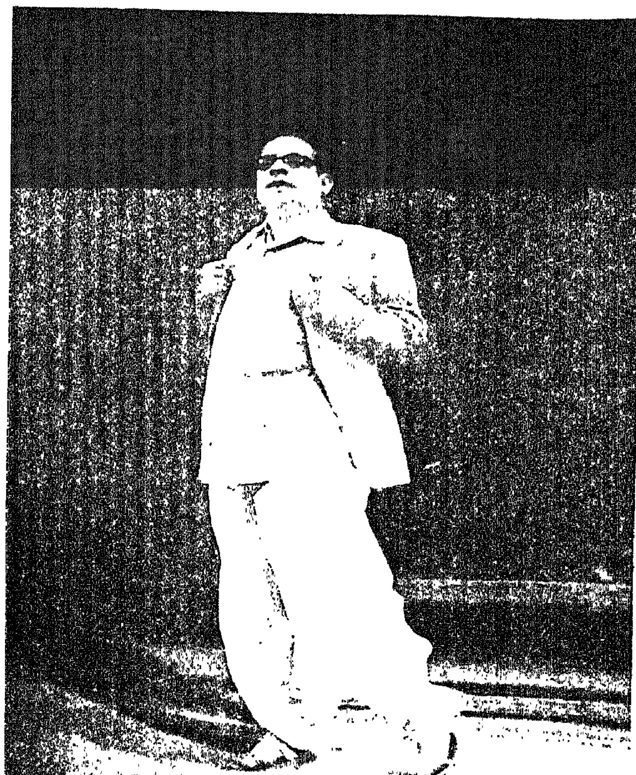
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I

The Divine Cause

In India all things descend from the Gods. No less the theatre. In the Golden Age of long, long ago when pain and sorrow were foreign to man, the need for spectacle and sensuous entertainment such as drama provides, was absent. It was indeed impossible, for what is dramatic experience if not a resolution of pain and joy? But when the curtain fell on the Golden Age and the universe was moved by contradictory passions and all manner of divisions had crept into life a need soon arose for recreation from the cares of the world. This was even more urgent because while the great repository of wisdom and knowledge, the four sacred *Vedas*, were accessible to the highest classes in society they were denied to lesser men.

Dissatisfied with this situation the gods led by Indra went to the Creator himself, Brahma, and begged him to produce something which all may enjoy a fifth *Veda*, as it were, which was not the exclusive preserve of the few. Accepting the eminent justice of such a prayer, Brahma, distilled from the *Rigveda*, the element of recitation; from the *Samaveda*, music; from the *Yajurveda*, representation and mime; and from the *Atharvaveda*,

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sentiment. And so was born the *Natyaveda*. He gave this to the gods but their leader Indra pleaded that they could not enact plays. Indra's argument appears to have been that since drama, as enjoined by Brahma, was to be objective, the gods by virtue of their passions and commitments and particularly their unending conflict with the demons would be found to take a partisan view. Only the Sages who had mastered all emotion, and contained within them the wisdom of the universe could undertake this task. And so that task was entrusted to mortals and one in particular, the Sage, Bharata, who from this *Veda* compiled the *Natyashastra*—the voluminous work which embodies all the physical, theoretical and conceptual ideas of traditional Indian drama. Through further divine intervention, Vishvakarma, the architect, built a playhouse, Shiva contributed the *tandava* dance expressing violent emotion and his goddess Parvati the *lasya* expressing the tender and voluptuous. Vishnu invented the four dramatic styles. These are the Verbal, the Grand, the Energetic and the Graceful. Thus the entire trinity of Hindu religion Brahma, the Creator; Vishnu, the Preserver; and Shiva, the Destroyer—all had a hand in the origin of drama.

That then is the legend. It has given scholars endless scope for interpretation and metaphysical speculation. We need not go too deeply into these. But suffice it to say that this legend seems to have been very useful in many ways to deal with certain problems peculiar to those times.

The advent of the Aryans into India brought about a certain cleavage between them and the inhabitants already living there, the Dravidians, who were progressively pushed down to the South. The conquering Aryans in their effort for survival soon established a caste-system both in order to maintain their

own purity and to forestall and prevent any fusion between themselves and the Dravidians. The ascendency of the priestly class, the Brahmin, within this society, and its undisputed authority in ecclesiastical and secular matters soon began to tell upon the world of art and culture.

For one thing, religion began to pervade all aspects of life. Nothing was sanctified, nothing could survive which did not have religious sanction behind it. For another, the inherent conservatism and kill joy outlook of the priestly order, common to all societies everywhere in the world, soon drove the entertainment arts to a mean and disreputable position. They became relegated to the lowest class, the Shudras, or to the vanquished Dravidians. This may explain the great pains to which Bharata went to establish the divine origin of drama, to give his *Shastra* the prestige of a *Veda* and to involve every god, Aryan and non-Aryan, so that his work would be both respectable and acceptable throughout the country.

The *Natyashastra*, however, bursts upon the Indian scene without warning. All at once it appears in all its exhaustive complexity, meticulous detail and bewildering diversity with no historical precedent or stages of development. Now, historical continuity in documentation is not a strong point about ancient India. A Herodotus, Thucydides or Plutarch is alien to Indian tradition. The ancient Indians were not at all bothered about history nor much about personal identification with their works. Much of what we know of history is largely the result of the painstaking interpretative researches in epigraphy, archaeology, numismatics and so on, collated with myth and folklore by contemporary scholars. Necessarily their reading is the subject of much dispute and contention. No one, therefore, is quite sure

as to the historical origin of Indian drama. A popular view that it began with the Aryans has been open to question, not only because the Dravidians are known to have had a sturdy and vigorous material civilisation but new excavations and discoveries point to a flourishing pre-Aryan civilisation even earlier than the Dravidian along the Indus Valley. It can, perhaps, be affirmed with as much certainty as denied, that the forerunners of Indian drama were the pre-Aryans and that the Aryans took at least some of the extant forms and traditions and gave them their own unique fashion and concept.

But to say that the pre-Aryans were the forerunners is not, necessarily, to assert that they had developed drama or dramatic tradition in any organised way as we know it.

The origin of Indian drama, as of significant drama anywhere else in the world, probably lies in the tribal ritual dances and liturgical celebration of antiquity. What began as a wholesale community participation would gradually break down into two groups—those who perform and those who watch, that is the actors and the audience. The form itself from involuntariness would get formalised into measured expression. As the dramatic impulse went forward, dance would be slowed down to gesture and mime, the liturgical chant would become secular and recitative and the two fuse. A period of germination and the purely impulsive invocations to the gods or nature sprout as studied themes and stories reflecting natural or supernatural life. When historic man appears on the scene, he is already possessed of sufficient civilisation and culture to be able to refine this dramatic rudiment into a strong and vigorous art.

This seems substantiated by the excavations and discoveries made at various sites of the Indus and Ganges Valley civilisa-

tions which show dance practised well over five thousand years ago and persisting down prehistory and history as dance and drama themes through the Vedic, Epic and Classical epochs.

And so it is that, though there must have been interaction and amalgamation, fusion and synthesis between many blends of culture, many scholars reach to Vedic literature and the *Vedas*, particularly the *Rigveda*, for the first cognisable roots of Indian drama.

The Vedic Indians, it is known, were greatly given to singing, dancing and playing musical instruments. These also played an important role in some of their rites. Mimicry, gesture and dialogue were features of certain ceremonies, and mock battles and quarrels were a part of them. Vedic and puranic writings are replete with dialogue. The dialogue hymns of the *Rigveda* are often cited in justification of dramatic intent in these early writings. Favourite examples taken from the *Rigveda* are the dialogues of Pururava and Urvashi, Varuna and Indra, and Yama and Yami. The dialogue between Pururava and Urvashi is particularly of great interest as it deals with a rather romantic episode the love of a mortal for a heavenly nymph, their meeting and final separation. Prof Amulya Charan Vidyabhusan also gives us an interesting fragmentation from the 10th book of the *Rigveda*. It is a dialogue between Pani and Sarama in eleven verses. Three of them in substance go like this :

PANI: What is it that has brought you here? It is indeed a long journey that you have undertaken and one, moreover, that can never be accomplished if you should look back even once. What special treasure do we possess that should have drawn you here? How many nights did you

spend on the way? How did you manage to cross the river?

SARAMA: I come as Indra's envoy. Pani, you have acquired great wealth of cattle here. I desire to take your herds. It was the water that protected me. The water was afraid that I might leap over it and go my way and thus was I able to cross the river?

PANI: So, Sarama, you have come as Indra's envoy, have you? What is he like, this Indra of yours? What is his appearance? He may come here if he chooses and we shall receive him as a friend. He may take charge of our cows.

Various other researches show that the word "nata" in the sense of "drama" is used in writings which date to the 8th century B.C. In the absence of any more concrete earlier evidence this is about the time we may assume that drama as a form came into being in India.

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Ancient Indian Theatre

The Literature

DESPITE THE DIVINE inspiration and guidance claimed for the *Natyashastra* by Bharata, this incredible work which has no parallel in world theatre literature is down to earth in its infinite minutiae of description, definition and direction. If it was the work of one man and many scholars doubt that is was - he must have been a remarkable individual who could understand, analyse and anticipate so many comprehensive problems and offer such detailed guidance in every conceivable aspect of dramatic production and presentation.

Some idea of the overwhelming detail of this work can be gauged by the mere recital of some of the topics dealt with in it. There is first of all the description of the origin of drama, of the various types of play-houses, the kinds of plays that may be produced, types of representation, the poetics of Indian drama, what the emotional states are which determine a good play and the sentiments which it should evoke. Directions are

given of the invocation to be offered to the gods before the play begins.

A large part of the work lists the various meaning[illegible] to which the hands, feet, eyes, eyelids, eyebrows, nose, [illegible], lower lip, chin, mouth, waist and thigh are to be put. [illegible] forms one of the most important elements of ancient Indian drama and it is not surprising that practically no movement of the limbs or body is ignored. We are given, for example, thirty-six different types of glances to cover every state and emotion. Such a large number include not only ordinary ones depicting pleasure, fear, pathos, cruelty, hauteur, astonishment, [illegible] and so on, but also such subtle ones as discouragement, [illegible], envy, accidental hurt, joy due to an experience of the [illegible]. Some idea of how elaborate this subtlety is can be best illustrated by the description of the glance of intoxication called Madira. This can be of three kinds. When the middle of the eye rolls, the eyes are bent, their ends thin, and corners fully widened, this represents light intoxication. In medium intoxication the eyelids slightly contract, the eyeballs and eyelashes are slightly mobile. In excessive intoxication eyes either wink too much or not wink at all, the eyeballs slightly are visible and the look turned downward.

The *Natyashastra* also deals with a host of other allied subjects like the body movements, gaits, the rules of prosody and metrical patterns—of which sixtyfive are listed and illustrated. Detailed guidance is given on the diction of a play, use of languages, mode of address and intonation, styles of action, representation—which includes, for instance, the beginning of love, signs of love, signs of love in a maiden, a courtesan, a highborn

lady*—costumes and make-up.

The *Natyashastra* is, however, not the only work on dramaturgy. For any intelligent and comprehensive appreciation of ancient Indian theatre there are several other works which merit mention.

The *Dasha-rupaka* or ten forms of dramatic composition, deals with dramatic criticism. It is the work of Dhananjaya and is thought to have been written in the 11th or 12th century A.D

The *Saraswati-Kanthabharana* written by Bhoja Raja deals mostly with poetical composition but the concluding portion relates to dramatic writing. This work is full of examples from contemporary plays of that period.

Of interest also is the work of a Kashmiri scholar, Bhatta Abhinava Gupta who appears to have lived some time in the early 11th century A.D. He wrote on various theories and problems concerning dramatics and aesthetics and chiefly a commentary on the *Natyashastra*. The merit of his work lies in the fact that he explains everything from various view-points with exhaustive examples from plays some of which are lost to us.

The *Kavya-Prakasha*, *Sahitya-Darpana* and *Sangita-Ratnakara* are various treatises in which the diligent scholar may find useful information regarding drama. There are also many works on poetics and commentaries accompanying some old plays

* For those who are interested: The courtesan shows her love by casting sidelong glances, touching her ornaments, tickling her ears, scratching the ground with her toes, showing her breast and so on. The highborn lady on the other hand is less overt but more demure: she conceals her smile, speaks slowly with downcast eyes, replies with a suggestion of a smile, and is generally trembling. The young maiden not having yet had the experience of love's ecstasy expresses herself in ten stages of longing, anxiety, recollection, enumeration of her lover's merits, distress, lamentation—and, (in extreme cases, sudden insanity, sickness, stupor, and—death!

which give us an insight into the complex, often beautiful, system devised for the Sanskrit theatre.

The Quality

Putting the origin of ancient Indian drama, or Sanskrit drama as it is often called, at about the 5th century B.C., is important because it disposes of one theory which has greatly agitated a lot of people. Some scholars had suggested that India borrowed drama from the Greeks. The Greeks were in India around the time that the *Natyashastra* is supposed to have been written which is about the 2nd or 3rd century B.C., although it may have been completed in the form in which we know it as late as the 8th century A.D. But though many arguments were advanced in support of this view equally weighty reasons have been used to counter it. On balance it will probably be found that the Greeks had little or no influence on the Indians in the realm of theatre. The overwhelming argument is that their approach to the basic concept of drama was wholly divergent. The Greeks said the aim of drama was to imitate the action while the Indian view was that it should imitate the state of condition. This is quite natural because it really reflects the very philosophy of life which motivated the two peoples. The Greek world view was amoral in which the human will does not participate in human action. Their gods were extra-cosmic, and arbitrary, and life ran its tragic course battling a blind, incomprehensible fate. The Indian view rejects this altogether. The gods are not extra-cosmic, they are higher senses of ourselves. Gods do not intervene in human affairs arbitrarily. Divine intervention, or rather participation, is always relevant and meaningful. A man's ac-

tions are guided by his own self and he may alter his course through them. Contrary to popular view Indians are not fatalistic, not in the Greek sense. The tragic element as the Greeks understand it is, therefore, totally alien to the Indians and consequently absent from Sanskrit drama. There may be affliction, misfortune, disaster, even calamity but always ending in a happy not tragic resolution. The early Indian dramatists, therefore, exalted the aesthetic, in contradistinction with the cathartic, quality of drama. This, I think, is the basic difference between Greek and Sanskrit drama which sets them apart and makes Indian drama quite unique. The other similarities or dissimilarities like the disregard in Sanskrit drama of the unities of time and place, extravagance or simplicity, the presence or absence of choruses and so on are not really fundamental.

The Object

With such a clear purpose, the early Indian theoreticians formulated an elaborate and rather delicate definition of the object of dramatic representation. Simply put, they said that drama should instruct through amusement. Hence it should affect the minds of the spectators with the sentiments which it expresses. Or more elaborately as Brahma, the Creator said :

> The drama I have devised is a mimicry of actions and conducts of people, which is rich in various emotions and which depicts different situations. This will relate to actions of men, good, bad and indifferent and will give courage, amusement and happiness as well as counsel to them all.
>
> The drama will be instructive to all, through actions and

states depicted in it, and through sentiments, arising out of it. Brahma also gave drama universal scope by saying that there would be no wise maxim, no learning, no art or craft, no device, no action that would not be found in it.

The states—also sometimes called feeling or emotion or mood —constitute *bhava.* The sentiments which arise constitute *rasa.* Sentiment is produced from a combination of determinants, consequents and transitory states. That is to say, we all possess certain basic moods or emotions. When they come in contact with transitory feelings aesthetic relish (or sentiment) is produced in us. One can perhaps compare the pleasurable relish which is awakened at the sight of a well-laid table, gracefully arranged, with subtle flavours emanating from food cooked with exquisite care, and by the meal that follows. Or a glorious sunset trembling in an atmosphere of infinite peace while gentle breezes touch the face. The feeling is one of surrender and sympathy with the situation. Thus, in drama, one who is deriving true enjoyment is he "who is happy when the course of the drama is cheerful, melancholy when it is sorrowful, who rages when it is furious and trembles when it is fearful"—in short, one who sympathises with the spectacle.

There are eight sentiments: erotic, comic, pathetic, furious, heroic, terrible, odious and marvellous.

Correspondingly there are eight dominant states: love, mirth, sorrow, anger, energy, terror, disgust and astonishment. These are part of the *bhavas* and are called *sthayi-bhava* or permanent states. The *bhavas* are further divided into the transitory states *(vyabhichari bhava)* of which there are thirtythree like joy, agitation, stupor, envy, anxiety, shame, despair, cruelty, reverie

and so on: the determinants called *vibhava* are "preliminary and accompanying conditions which lead to any particular state of mind or body", the consequents called *anubhava* are the "external signs which indicate their existence".

Some examples will illustrate the interaction of the transitory states, determinants and consequents. No less than thirtythree transitory states are listed. We shall examine only four.

Chinta is painful recollection. Its determinant is the loss or absence of a desired object. Its consequent, tears, sighs, change of complexion. Our example is from the *Dasha-Rupaka:*

> Whom do you think of gentle and lovely maiden, as you lean your cheek upon your hand, around whose wrists the lotus fibre twines, a cooling bracelet ? From those long lashes drops a stream of pearly tears, to weave a lengthened necklace, far more bright than Hara's radiant smile.

Smriti is remembrance. Its determinant is the effort to remember or the association of ideas, its consequent the drawing up or contraction of the eyebrows, nodding of the head, looking down and so on. From the *Hanuman Nataka* we get this example :

> Is this Mainaka that stops my way through the air? Whence is this audacity? Has he forgotten how he shrank from the thunderbolt of Indra? Is it Tarkshya that thus presumes, who ought to know me, Ravana, the equal of his lord?
> No, it is Jatayu oppressed by years, he comes to court his death.

Shanka is apprehension based on doubt either of being found out in misconduct or not getting something desired. Its determinant is misconduct or another person's displeasure. Its consequent is hesitating movement, furtive look, loss of voice, tremor, dry lips and so on. In the *Ratnavali* we have this passage :

> She shrinks from every gaze, suspecting that her secret is discovered. If she observes two of her companions in conversation, she thinks they are talking of her; and if they laugh, she thinks herself the object of their mirth.

Avahitta is dissimulation or concealment of appearance. Its determinant is shame, fear, defeat, respect, deceit; its consequent is hesitant speech, looking downwards, acting in a manner differing from the true object. From the *Kumara-Sambhava* we get :

> Whilst thus the divine sage spoke, the beauteous Parvati, standing by his side, held down her head with shame, and pretended to count the leaves of the lotus in her hand.

The System

Dramatic representation was conceived of in three forms : *Natya*, gesture with language, that is drama; *Nritya*, gesture without language, that is pantomime; and *Nritta*, pure dancing. *Natya* is what we are concerned with.

Drama was divided into two kinds : *lokadharmi* or realistic— the word literally means popular, and *natyadharmi* or conventional—literally theatrical. One must be rather careful in understanding these distinctions. The realistic play is said to be one

which depends on natural behaviour, simple, dealing with the professions and activities of people and acted without flourish. That is ordinary people acting out ordinary situations ordinarily. But obviously an enactment which followed a rule so rigidly would become a frightful bore, and would be devoid of purpose or pleasure. In fact, however, realistic plays soon developed conventions of "unrealism". The conventional or theatrical play, on the other hand, admitting of artificiality and poetic fancy became lyrical and imaginative. But the accent on the convention robbed it of true vigour and carried in it the seed of self-destruction because the playwright became more obsessed with poetic achievement rather than dramatic justification.

Within this framework, dramatic compositions were arranged into *rupakas* or plays proper and *uparupakas* or minor plays. There are ten types of *rupakas* and eighteen *uparupakas*. It is not necessary to examine all these but the two major ones; the *Nataka* and *Prakarana*.

In the *nataka*, the story is drawn from mythology or historical record, the subject celebrated. The hero is always an exalted person, a king like Dushyanta in Kalidasa's most famous play *Shakuntala*, or a demi-god like Rama, or a divinity like Krishna. There is a singular passion like love, devotion, heroism. The plot is simple and the action moves with orderly and consistent precision. The time of action is short but any elongation is by narrative. This rule, however, is notably ignored in many plays. The play is between five and ten acts.

The *prakarana* is less exalted but still very elevated. The play is pure fiction, from real life, however, and almost always deals with one theme : love. Its characters belong to the higher levels of society, ministers, priests, military leaders, merchants. The he-

roine could be a courtesan, the term being understood as a geisha rather than a harlot. *Mrichchhakatika* or *The Little Clay Cart* is the most renowned play in this category.

Characteristics

Much ceremonial is attached to the presentation of a Sanskrit play. There was first of all an invocation to the gods. This was followed by an introduction of the author usually of praise rather than disparagement, and a complimentary appeal to the audience. This was done by a *Sutradhara* (literally, one who holds the strings but loosely, a sort of chorus though not in the Greek sense). He also set the time and place of the play giving such background detail as was necessary for the audience to pick up the thread at the beginning of the action proper when one of the personages appeared. Two supplementary performers who were not part of the play interpreted the action or change of scene or provided diversion and continuity. There was yet another character, a jester or fool called *Vidushaka* a fat, ugly, uncouth, short, greedy fellow often given to vulgarity and ribaldry always a Brahmin. He performed many useful functions though his presence created absurdities in a play. For one thing, he provided comic relief, for another he acted as a foil and go-between for the hero. Possessing licence of speech and movement he could say anything to anyone and have access to all places including such forbidden ones as the women's quarters. He was probably a Brahmin for two reasons. The hero could confide his most secret thoughts to him since he belonged to the highest class. The audience could enjoy his discomfiture for he was much abused on the stage by all—and derive some vicarious satisfaction at see-

ing their priestly class, which we may assume was not exactly popular, subjected to such indignity.

Since one of the objects of a play was to interpret the ideal side of life the hero and heroine were inevitably drawn from the noblest or near-divine examples available. The vast storehouse of the great Indian epics, the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* gave unlimited material for dramatists.

The *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* are the epics comparable but not analogous to the Greek *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. The Greek epics are detached accounts of the adventures of men and gods; their influence upon the ancient Greeks was not significantly personal their influence upon the modern European is only intellectual. But the Indian epics have always had the most profound effect on the lives, attitudes, ethos, morals and aspirations of the Indian peoples, because they were conceived as the repository for faith, instruction and inspiration. They are totally woven into the lives of the Indians.

The *Mahabharata* is the story of the long feud between the five Pandava brothers and their hundred cousins, the Kauravas, and encompasses within it not only a moving story of courage idealism, rectitude and salvation but also the entire body of the *Bhagavad-Gita*, a dialogue poem between the Lord Krishna and the warrior Arjuna, a Pandava, which has been the source of perennial inspiration for Indians towards right conduct and the path to redemption.

The *Ramayana* is the story of the ideal Man, Rama, and the ideal Woman, Sita, and their travails through life both brought upon and overcome by integrity and virtue.

Both these epics are full of side episodes which make for excellent theatre as the Sanskrit dramatists understood it. By subtle

interpolations ruling patrons could be identified with the virtues of the hero; sometimes they could even be genealogically connected with him.

This, indeed, brings us to another feature of the old plays. Even though the *Natyashastra* gives us very precise descriptions of three types of playhouses, the oblong, square and triangular, there is, in fact, no evidence of any such theatre. What does seem to have happened was that these plays were staged in royal palaces, princely chambers or in the halls of noble patrons. They were never meant to be a popular entertainment. They were also performed only on occasions like a royal coronation, religious festivals, marriages, the birth of a son and so on. The top classes were witness to them. E. P. Horrowitz in his book *The Indian Theatre* gives a long, imaginary, but graphic description of the première of *Shakuntala.* Based on whatever we know of stage presentation in those times it is probably as accurate a description as can be reconstructed.

The natural consequence of this state of affairs was two-fold. First, because of the makeshift nature of the performance, properties and scenic apparatus must have been minimal, if they existed at all. This may well have reinforced the tendency toward the use of poetic narration, imagery, symbolic gesture and the appeal to imagination to compensate for an essentially bare stage. Rich and gorgeous costumes, however, were used, as there would be no difficulty about taking them around and they would rather enhance the visual quality of the play.

Secondly, the dependence on palace patronage and an audience of the cultural élite inhibited the Sanskrit drama from ever becoming an art of the people and it remained a class-institution. Though the *Natyaveda* was devised so that common people

could avail of the wisdom of the *Vedas* denied to them, in effect they were kept as much away by this restricted scope of dissemination. The dramatist, himself, in order to please his sophisticated audience threw many of the dramatic elements to the winds. His work became exalted, romantic, artificial. He ranged between heaven and earth, disregarded the unities of time and space, loaded the play with lyrical and poetic tergiversations. Bharata had said that the dramatist should employ choice and harmonious terms and an elevated and polished style, embellished with the ornaments of rhetoric and rhythm. His counsel was often carried to formidable extremes.

The class motivation of the dramatist and dramaturgist probably explains a rather curious feature of these Sanskrit plays. They are, indeed, not written in Sanskrit alone. Different characters speak different forms of speech. According to his rank and station or role the actor spoke his language. This has to be rather carefully understood. It is not, for example, to be confused with the use of dialect in an English play where a Londoner might speak cockney and other Englishmen various other dialects so much deplored by George Bernard Shaw in *Pygmalion*. This is for realism and effect. One would in realistic terms expect an earl to speak a form of Oxford English and a charwoman cockney. This is occasional and a play could get by with a standard English spoken by all. But in Sanskrit drama it was mandatory that different characters speak differently. The division was vertical, not horizontal. Thus the hero and principal *male* characters would speak Sanskrit, the heroine and principal *female* characters another dialect; royal attendants, servants and traders, rogues and villains, intriguers, cowherds, the people of the forest, and so on would all speak their respective languages.

Of course strict adherence to this rule would have resulted in an unintelligible bable for almost any spectator. So eventually we get Sanskrit and the Prakrit, a name standing for the several varieties of the language of the common folk, derived or modified from Sanskrit. Probably not more than two or three forms of the Prakrit were used, their differentiation being more in the nature of refinement or crudity of language and speaking.

3

Sanskrit Plays and Playwrights

To SAY THAT Sanskrit plays were artificial, unrealistic, sensuous, lacking in dramatic tension, a close class-preserve and so on, is, however, not to damn them. Several critics fall into the familiar error of judging them not in terms of the milieu for which they were written but in terms of our own; not in terms of the social ethic and aesthetic concept of the times for which they were written, but again, of our own. This is a wholly wrong and unfair comparison. The error is further compounded because even in a contemporary milieu most of these critics, who belong to the West or are West-oriented, have a totally different attitude to life and living, a different world-view and human assumption. Only a few Western savants have managed to acquire even now a "sympathy" for today's Eastern values, assumptions and attitudes. Thus the Sanskrit aspiration, if one may use that word, becomes quaint, esoteric, to be savoured occasionally much as one might for the fun of it taste an unfamiliar Polynesian dish. A further impediment, I think, is that unlike the Polynesian dish the contact is rarely direct. By this I mean that most people

can reach the Sanskrit play only through a translation in some other language. Consequently the onus of conveying its fullest beauty, power and flavour falls on the translator. One can well imagine the fate of Tolstoy in English if he had not had the good fortune of having the Maudes as his translators. In the case of Shakespeare, for example, one does not quite know how he emerges in French or German or Russian. Certainly two attempts in Hindi, brave though they were, failed to bring out the terrifying force and poetic grandeur of *Macbeth* and *Othello*.

The Sanskrit dramatist, as any other craftsman of his period, it must be understood, lived within his time. He accepted his social, political, religious and moral order. As in most, if not all, societies of that time he neither questioned that order nor revolted against it. In India the social order divided the people along class lines but held them together in a harmonious whole. Politically it was largely an age of kings and the nobility generally held sway. In religion the Indian lived within the broad spectrum of Hinduism and he considered his gods as an exalted manifestation of his higher self and his mission one of aspiring through devotion and devout works to be one with the Infinite. He accepted the rightness of things as they were, believing in the essential harmony of his universe where life must flow with an even tenor. Some of us with today's outlook may deplore the fact that there were no apostates trying to dismantle the Establishment. But to the old Indian, as to most people in those times anywhere, such ideas would have been unthinkable. If I appear to ignore the powerful apostasy of Buddhism, it is because despite it the general philosophical attitude of the Indian shifted but little.

I do not think from this we must necessarily conclude that

he was either a dupe of social exploitation or a mere pawn of blind fatalism. The evidence of his many creations in various cultural fields shows him to be a man of considerable intellectual, aesthetic, and perceptual imagination, freedom and vigour. He was no cloistered pessimist who twelve hundred years ago attacked an enormous rock face at Ellora to produce the great Kailasa Temple. Carved, for that is the word, not built, is this staggering work of man, out of one massive piece of stone after hewing out 200,000 tons of rock from the side of a mountain. To create the temple, openings a hundred feet high and a hundred-and-fifty feet wide were cut three hundred feet deep into solid rock so that the temple would be open to the sky. In the centre of this huge "courtyard" an enormous piece of stone was left standing to be carved and hollowed out to make the Kailasa Temple, 164 feet in length, 109 feet in breadth and 96 feet high. Inside workmen, if workmen they can be called, sculpted statuary, fluted columns, carvings, figures in heavy relief in an infinite variety of form, structure and theme—a physical feat as remarkable as the building of the nine wonders of the world and an artistic feat to compare almost with the accumulated beauty of other ancient civilisations. This prodigy and other works scattered throughout India embodying courage and vision, devotion, the wonder and joy of life in its thousand manifest forms speak of the inspiration which their philosophy gave these people.

There would be plenty of time in later epochs to develop heady ferments and casual creeds! A believer in such cosmic elegance would, therefore, shrink at his more refined levels from rude passions. He would assume that all situations must resolve themselves in orderliness. That is why Oedipus Rex would be

beyond his comprehension but King Harishchandra would be both cogent and understandable. King Harishchandra is put to cruel tests, dispossessed of his kingdom, his wife reduced to beggary, he himself driven to the mean station of a cremation attendant and made to conduct his own little son's cremation. However, at that crucial moment, the Sage Vishwamitra, who has put him to these ordeals to test the claim of the gods that he (Harishchandra) was a man of truth and right conduct, stops the act and restores to him his family and possessions. Unlike Oedipus who is a hapless victim of a bewildering, cynical fate which checkmates each of his absolving actions with a greater enormity till he is past all reason and devoid of redemption. Harischandra is a protagonist in a challenge to his devotion to truth and righteousness with a chance of salvation if he can stand up to it. His failure would have brought about an ugly, negative and pointless end; his success opens up instruction and inspiration for all men. And this as Brahma, the Creator said, is the ultimate object of all such representation, and chiefly, dramatic representation. The result of this aesthetic and philosophical approach with the accent on balance, serenity, repose and what might be called optimism was the emergence of a drama that was highly lyrical and idealised. This idealisation, however, it must clearly be understood, did not mean fanciful and out-of-this-world characters and situations. The coarse side whether of human nature or suffering is never allowed to obtrude. The shock on the senses through the material exposition of suffering such as we find in *King Lear* is absent in classical Indian drama. So also are moral indignation and tragic and comic irony. And yet the heroic heroes are not all faultless. Similarly no villain is tarnished with the brush of total evil—no Iago, Cassius and

Lady Macbeth exist. For in the view of Indian philosophy there can be no human being wholly good or wholly bad. In the great epic, *Mahabharata*, often described as the struggle of good and evil, no absolutes emerge on either side—the good have deplorable vices, the evil have inspiring virtues. Similarly in the other great epic, the *Ramayana*, the hero Rama, most celebrated model of perfect man, near-god, is not above human weakness while Ravana, most celebrated model of wickedness is not below nobility. It must not be concluded, however, that the failure to define sharp categories, sharp conflicts, violent contrasts of light and shade enfeebled the image. The Indian dramatist was concerned with the totality of man and his experience toward the sublime. And so the object being to create an artistic entity the play became like a symphony, each act being a movement in a mood, the totality an integration and synthesis producing a superior mood or sentiment.

Despite the handicaps of language, time, mores and attitude we can sense that, at its peak, Sanskrit drama is without doubt among the finest and noblest expressions of human creation which in the case of Kalidasa's *Shakuntala* moved Goethe to rhapsodic ecstasy.*

Not more than about sixty major Sanskrit plays are available to us, and not all of them are, of course, great classics.

* Of *Shakuntala*, Goethe said :

"Wouldst thou the young year's blossoms
  and the fruits of its decline
And all by which the soul is charmed,
  enraptured, feasted, fed?
Wouldst thou the earth and heaven itself
  in one sole name combine?
I name, thee, O Shakuntala; and all at once is said."

Ashvaghosha

To try and fix a probable date for the earliest known Sanskrit play is to step straightaway into a maze of scholarly profundity and controversy. But a broad consensus of agreement seems to indicate the answer to lie in the palm-leaf fragments found in Central Asia taking us to the Kushan period of the 1st century A.D. One of the fragments is a nine-act Buddhist play by Ashvaghosha, the court poet of the Kushan King Kanishka. The play is called *Sariputra Prakarana.* It deals with two young men who gained the Buddha's favour. A rather interesting point about this play is that it follows scrupulously all the rules laid down in the *Natyashastra.*

Bhasa

Not so Bhasa, the next earliest known dramatist. Till the early years of this century his existence was only conjectured from references in later works, particularly those of Kalidasa. In the first decade of this century a South Indian scholar, Ganapathi Shastri made the startling discovery in an old library in Travancore of thirteen manuscripts containing fragments of plays which he thought were the work of Bhasa. A lot of research seemed to substantiate this view. But these plays do not appear to show much familiarity with the tenets of the *Natyashastra.* Either this dramatist lived and wrote before the *Natyashastra* was compiled or else he was a man who exercised considerable freedom and originality.

The length of Bhasa's plays varies from one to six acts. The most striking characteristic of his plays compared with those

of his illustrious successors of Sanskrit drama is that he seems to be conversant with the actual mechanics of stagecraft. In other words, his plays are actable and not encumbered with too much of poetic fancy to halt the action. The unities are well preserved, the dramatic development consistent, and the action rapid and direct. Like most other dramatists of that epoch, Bhasa took the epics, *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata,* for his source material. Of his plays the most famous is called *Svapna-Vasavadatta* or *The Vision of Vasavadatta*. It exemplifies best his craftsmanship of dramatic writing. Though six acts in length it holds attention throughout. The story in brief is about the stratagem used by a clever minister to sustain his monarch's throne. A marriage with a neighbouring princess is essential to gain this objective. But the king, Udayana, is already married to Vasavadatta to whom he is inordinately devoted. The minister contrives during a temporary absence of the Queen to make out that both he and the Queen are lost in the burning of a village. But in reality he prevails upon her to become a lady-in-waiting to the very princess, Padmavati, to whom Udayana is to be married. Udayana, never fully resigned to the death of Vasavadatta, finally agrees to meet Padmavati. In her palace by a chance (skilfully contrived by Bhasa), Vasavadatta meets Udayana and the King believes that it is her vision that he sees. All his old passion sweeps him and he is in the torment of having to honour Padmavati whom he has married, while yet loving Vasavadatta whom he believes dead. This predicament is resolved when Vasavadatta reveals herself not as a vision but a reality and all three the King, the Queen and the new consort—reconcile themselves to the new relationship.

Although entirely free from philosophical profundity or ab-

struseness in the text and firmly grounded in a crisp, realistic dialogue, the skill of Bhasa brings out metaphysical overtones that are most conspicuous about this work. Two queens, potential rivals, yet become true friends through the goodness of their nature and upbringing and their concept of duty, with the king at the third corner of this triangle bringing in an absurd situation only to be resolved with poetic grace. Within this frame Bhasa examines the predicament of man as he moves through the intersection of reality and illusion.

Kalidasa

If *The Vision of Vasavadatta* may be considered an ideal metaphysical play, *Shakuntala,* the work of Kalidasa, the greatest of the Sanskrit dramatists, is the ideal poetic play. In it almost every aspect of the poetics of Sanskrit drama and its aesthetic formulations find incomparable expression.

Kalidasa lived in some period of the 5th century A.D. which is about as close as most authorities will agree upon. He came well after Bhasa of whom he speaks with reverence in the prologue of one of his plays. Of his life and times we know little. As in the case of William Shakespeare, with whom he is often compared, Kalidasa is the subject of many disputatious claims. His very name has provided some with an argument that Kalidasa was an uneducated person till the goddess Kali bestowed poetic power on him. Kalidasa means "servant of Kali". Perhaps divine bounty alone can sustain this argument for Kalidasa otherwise shows in his work evidence of lifelong familiarity and assimilation of the finest in the culture of his milieu. Not for nothing have his plays excited admiration through the ages.

Another popular belief has it that Kalidasa lived in the era of King Vikramaditya and was, indeed, one of the "nine jewels" of his court. But Vikramaditya lived in the century before Christ and to accept Kalidasa as belonging to so early an epoch would throw historical perspective with other known dramatists out of gear.

Only three of Kalidasa's plays are available to us—there is no evidence that he wrote any other -*Malavikagnimitra, Abhijnana-Shakuntala* and *Vikramorvashiya.* Although *Shakuntala* appears to be the second play yet in terms of its mature craftsmanship and its poetic brilliance it has been suggested that it must be his last and crowning achievement.

The story of *Shakuntala* is taken from an episode in the *Mahabharata.* It deals with the daughter of the Sage Vishwamitra and Menaka Shakuntala who is brought up by a hermit, Kanva, for a great future. But that greatness is not easy in the coming.

During a royal hunt in his forests, the great and handsome king Dushyanta chances upon Kanva's hermitage and there, in the absence of the hermit, he meets Shakuntala. Dushyanta is completely infatuated with her and he confides to a friend,

The Creator, gathering in his mind
All lovely forms, depicted her
And breathed new life into his work
And always when I contemplate
All her beauty and the Maker's might,
She seems to me a peerless gem.

But like all lovers he is tortured by doubt and self-deprecation:

I cannot know whom Fate shall once
Permit to own this faultless form,
A bloom whose perfume none has drunk,
A bud by human hand uncut,
A pure, unperforated pearl,
Fresh honey not by mortal sipped,
The perfect fruit of holy deeds.

In her turn Shakuntala smitten by love is also in agony of indecision. The two are brought together and they exchange endearments upon learning that each loves the other.

SHAKUNTALA: Thy heart I know not; as for me
whose yearnings centre all in thee,
Love tortures with a burning ray,
Thou cruel one, both night and day.
DUSHYANTA: Love, slender maid, may torture thee,
But not consume as it does me.
The day-star in the glare of noon
The lotus burns, but blights the moon.

Dushyanta soon goes home leaving with Shakuntala his ring as a token of their union and the promise that he will send for her after a while. The hermit, Kanva, who has been away all this time is now due back and the question is how to break the news of Shakuntala's marriage and, indeed, of her approaching confinement. At this point an unforseen misfortune strikes the poor girl. In her lovelorn state she fails to give the customary welcome and hospitality to a visiting irascible ascetic, Durvasa, who curses her in these words:

He whom alone you think about,
Not heeding me, a pious saint,
Shall now forget you, spite of all,
Just as the sot forgets his talk.

Durvasa, despite many entreaties, refuses to revoke the curse but at last agrees to mitigate it by saying that though his words must be fulfilled, yet at the sight of the ring Dushyanta will remember Shakuntala. The ring which Dushyanta had given Shakuntala thus becomes the dominant instrument of the entire play and upon it depends the fate of the various characters of the play and the resolution of their entanglements.

Recognition by ring is not an unusual theme and one encounters it in various legends in all kinds of cultures, Buddhist, Byzantine and Judaic. There is the story of the Emperor Justinian and his wife Antonio, of Tamar and Judah, which revolve on the ring. Kalidasa has taken this story from the *Mahabharata* though for his purpose he has altered the theme slightly.

The hermit, Kanva, returning, is given the glad tidings of Shakuntala's condition and forthwith makes preparations to send her to Dushyanta. With every sign of sorrow from man and nature and many words of tender advice from Kanva, Shakuntala sets off for the court of Dushyanta. But, alas, the ring is lost in crossing a river and predictably Dushyanta fails to recognise Shakuntala and rejects her, despite all kinds of arguments and other tokens of their love offered by Shakuntala and her retinue. But the king is seized by doubt:

Uncertain whether here my own
Remembrance or her words be false,

Shall I repudiate my bride,
Or, sinning, clasp another's wife?

A priest of the court offers a solution: he will take her into his home and when her child is born, if it carry the mark of kingship on his hand as it has been ordained for the first-born of Dushyanta, then Shakuntala will become the queen. Otherwise she goes back. But Shakuntala will have no more of humiliation and she calls upon mother Earth to take her to her bosom. A shining apparition then carries her off. Dushyanta, ill at ease, retires to his chamber musing:

Though I do not recall that ever
I wed the Saint's rejected child,
Yet in my deeply troubled soul
I hear a voice: "She spoke the truth."

A short while later a fisherman is caught by the King's police for being in possession of a ring which they believe he has stolen. The fisherman says he has found it in a fish he has caught. He is brought before the King and Dushyanta not only recognises the ring as his own but with it his remembrance of Shakuntala returns and he is grief-stricken with the loss of his bride. For long he consoles himself with her picture but duty calls him. The summons is from none other than the god Indra who needs his help in battle with some demons. The mission accomplished, Dushyanta is riding back in Indra's aerial car when he sees the sacred grove of the saint Kashyap on a golden peak of the Himalayas. It is here, in fact, that Shakuntala has been brought and here she has her child. Dushyanta meets the child who

is teasing a lion-cub, discovers the mark of kingship on his hand and by other tokens knows the boy as his own and is reunited with Shakuntala.

Into this story of love and tenderness, of noble and lofty sentiment, Kalidasa has woven a thousand strands of poetry and eloquence, power and grace, poise and elegance, pathos and ecstasy to produce a rich brocade of dramatic excellence. At every turn Kalidasa shows not only his remarkable awareness of dramatic form and content as it was known in his time but also his extraordinary responsiveness to beauty around him whether it be of nature or conduct or emotion. Never more sensitive or lyrical nor more powerful is he than when he draws a picture of nature:

The moon sinks down into the West,
While in the east the glorious sun
Behind the herald dawn appears.
So rise and set, in constant change,
Those shining orbs, and regulate
The very life of this our world! And now:
The moon is gone; and then no more
the charming lily of the night
Delights my eye—her beauty now
A sweet remembrance, nothing else.
Just so a tender maiden mourns,
Her absent love, disconsolate.
The dew drops on the jujube
By the early morn impurpled, burn.

The waking peacock leaves its place
Upon the thatch; and the deer start
From their soft, hoof-imprinted couch
And curve their backs and stretch their limbs.

As it often happens, the very brilliance of a supernova dims the neighbouring constellations though they may themselves have fiery lustre in their own right. And so it is that Kalidasa by his magnificence outshines the other luminaries around him but that does not mean they were lacklustre. At least three of these merit mention.

Shudraka

In trackless territory where history is no guide and legend and internal evidence are the only signposts, characters can only loom as through a glass, darkly. Even so in some cases we may discern them with some clarity. But Shudraka, one of the greats of Sanskrit drama, emerges as a will-o'- the-wisp, suddenly clear, suddenly fugitive. He is the author of *Mrichchhakatika* or *The Little Clay Cart,* the only Sanskrit play which is internationally known today next to *Shakuntala.* So baffling is he that experts are in total disagreement about his position, in time whether he is B.C. or A.D., in history whether he is before or after Kalidasa, and, indeed, whether he existed at all and is not a cover for someone else. In the prologue to *The Little Clay Cart* he is described in considerable detail as a king of great virtue, courage and scholarship who after a long reign enthroned his son, performed the horse-sacrifice and at the age of a hundred years cast himself into the fire. But these details confuse rather than clarify.

It is thought that Shudraka, a rather unusual name for a king because it seems to suggest that he was of the lowest caste, is given regal status both to establish antiquity and authority, but that in reality he did not exist. What is of great interest, which may help us to locate him somewhere between Bhasa and Kalidasa, is that *The Little Clay Cart* is, in fact, a greatly enlarged and refined version of a play of Bhasa called *Charudatta.* It could be that Shudraka took *Charudatta* and polished it into *The Little Clay Cart.* It would be absurd to expect that Bhasa could have taken *The Little Clay Cart* and made an inferior version of it. But, on the other hand, if Shudraka came after Bhasa it is strange that Kalidasa should not name him while praising other dramatists before him including Bhasa.

Be that as it may, *The Little Clay Cart,* is one of the great comedies of all time and apart from its greatness it also helps us to see the variegated cross-section of Sanskrit drama. The little clay cart has little to do in *The Little Clay Cart* and is no more relevant than the bald soprano in Eugene Ionesco's *The Bald Soprano.* Indeed this is another curiosity in Sanskrit drama, a title seemingly chosen at random from a small and passing incident which has neither significance nor symbolism. *The Little Clay Cart* is the story of the love of Charudatta, a noble but impoverished Brahmin, and Vasantasena, a courtesan of great beauty and refinement. As Shudraka himself says in the prologue, by means of these two personages are "exhibited the joys of honourable love, the practical applications of wisdom, the perils which are engendered by litigation, the perversity of the wicked and the ineluctability of the decrees of destiny". With such a compass it is not surprising that the story is most complicated with plot and sub-plot, wiles and stratagem and marvellous

turns of fortune. But Shudraka writes with urbane wit and poetic clarity. Despite many perilous situations caused by wrong moves and misunderstandings, hair-breadth escapes, and even a near execution of the hero, there is never a sense of tragedy or doom. Rather, one is always assured by the easy dialogue, the jolly turn of phrase, the amusing change of event, that all must work out well in the end. The play gives Shudraka an admirable chance to make some penetrating observations and comments on human nature and foibles and gives us a fascinating and vivid picture of his times.

If the play has any discomfort for the modern reader it is chiefly on one or two counts. For example, the seemingly endless variations of Charudatta's lament on poverty pall after a point. Or the repetitive dialogue in the last two acts, or the long poetic exchange between Vasantasena and her escort about a gathering storm at the moment of her assignation with her lover seem unnatural. But on the other hand the discourse of the thief on the methods of entry and theft is brilliant in its detail and wit.

SHARVILAKA: Night has hidden the stars behind a thick curtain of clouds; like a mother, she clothes with darkness the intrepid hero who undertakes to pillage the house of another, and whose profession worries the royal guardsmen. Having made a breach in the outer wall, I have made my way into the garden. And now I must set to work on the house itself. Yes. People may cast aspersions on our craft because our successes are facilitated by the sleep and by the unwariness of our victims; people may despise our stratagems and call our heroism brigan-

dage, but our independence, however decried, is certainly preferable to menial labour and servitude. Moreover, was not the path that I follow traced of old by Drona's son when he took advantage of their sleep to slay the Pandava chieftains ?

And now where shall I make an opening ?

Where the wall has settled because of the infiltration of water; where there will be no noise; where the aperture will not present an aspect contrary to that prescribed by the rules of Kleptology; where the masonry is old and the bricks have been corroded by saltpetre; where women will not see me; in a word where I can hope to attain success most speedily.

(He sounds the wall.)

Here, precisely, is the place where the clay has been loosened by alternate exposure to the sun's heat and to water from the eaves; it has been cracked open by saltpetre, and there are rat holes. Excellent! My work is well on its way. Such a beginning is an excellent augury for the children of the Clever One. Now let me see ... How shall I make a breach in the wall ? In situations of this sort, the Lord of the Golden Javelin has prescribed four methods of procedure; if the bricks are of terra cotta, they must be removed; if they are of dried clay, they must be cut; if the wall is of piled-up earth, water must be applied; if there are wooden pilings, they must be sawn in two. In this case, the bricks, since they are of terra cotta, must be removed.

Now the aperture may be shaped like a full-blown lotus flower, like the disc of the sun, like the crescent moon, like

an ellipse, like an elongated rectangle, like a swastika, or like a water-ewer. Now how can I exhibit my proficiency in the art, so that citizens, when they inspect my work to-morrow, will be struck with admiration ?

In the case of these terra cotta bricks, the ewer-shaped aperture would, I think, be most appropriate—so, that is the form which I shall adopt. On the other occasions, when I had pierced walls corroded with saltpetre and had undertaken difficult operations, the next morning the neighbours, when they examined my handiwork, criticiz-ed the errors that I had made, or praised the skilfulness of my craftsmanship. Glory to the youthful god Kartikeya who answers our prayers! Glory to the Lord of the Golden Javelin who is pious and devoted to Brah-man! Hail to the son of Siva! Praise to the Master of Magic whose foremost disciple am I! Propitiously has he given me the unguent of invulnerability. I have only to anoint myself with it, and the guardsmen will be unable to see me; when I am protected by it, swords directed against me will make no wound.

(He anoints himself.)

Ah, for shame ! I have forgotten my measuring-tape ! *(He ponders a moment.)* But now that I think about it, my Brahmanic cord will take its place. Truly this cord is a very precious thing—especially for a Brahmin like me! For in-deed,

it can be used to measure off the opening that one makes in walls, to pull down jewels from the high shelves on which they are placed, to manipulate bolts so that the most solidly constructed door may be opened, and to

make a tourniquet when one is bitten by a venomous insect or snake.

So let's measure off the proportions and put ourselves to work. (*He works for some time, then stops to examine the hole that he has made.*) Only one more brick to be removed; then the breach will be perfect. Damn it! I have been bitten by a snake. (*He binds his Brahmanic cord about his finger, and for a moment he shows the effects of the venom*). What an efficacious remedy. I am all right now. (*He resumes work; then stops and peers into the opening.*) Ah, I see a light! Thus

The golden glow of the lamp traverses the aperture and shines along the ground, it gleams in the depths of the encompassing darkness like a grain of gold on a pantarb.

(*He resumes his work.*)

There, the passage is completed. Well, let's go in—or rather, let's not go in until we have introduced our companion. (*He pushes a mannekin inside*) Ah, good! There's no one about. Glory to Kartikeya! (*He passes through the breach in the wall and emerging on the inside of the house looks about.*) Ah, two men asleep! I must open the door so that I will have a means of escape. Curse it! The house is old and the door squeaks. I'll get some water. But where can I find it? (*He hunts about, finally finds some water, and applies it to the door with great precaution.*) Now I hope that this sagging door doesn't fall from its hinges and make a racket... well, let's risk it. (*With his back to the door, he slowly opens it.*) Good! Now it's a question of finding out whether these two are merely pretending they are asleep, or are really asleep. (*Watching them intently, he suddenly makes a mena-*

cing gesture.) Well, it would seem that they are really asleep, for their respiration is regular, calm, and deep; their eyes are closed tightly, but do not seem to be constrained; there is no flickering of the eye-lids. Their bodies are relaxed, and their limbs with unflexed muscles dangle over the edge of the beds. Moreover, if their sleep were feigned, they could not stand scrutiny with the rays of the lamp shining full upon their faces. (*He looks about.*)

The various characters in *The Little Clay Cart* are brought out in sharp contrast and detail. In most other Sanskrit plays the major characters emerge in bold relief and the minor characters remain vague and amorphous. But Shudraka sketches them all vividly. Charudatta, the hero, is a model of virtue and nobility; Vasantasena, a model of grace and loveliness. But Charudatta's companion, Maitreya is the embodiment of friendship and constancy; the villain, Samasthanaka, brother-in-law of the king—a loutish, self-opinionated, pompous boor is brought out in all his obnoxiousness. The thief Sharvilaka, the masseur turned monk, Mathura the proprietor of a gambling house, police guards, executioners, slave-girls, all these become individual and living figures.

Lively dialogue abounds in *The Little Clay Cart*. When Vasantsena has escaped from the clutches of the pursuing villain, Samasthanaka, his friend the Vita suggests that they now depart.

SAMASTHANAKA: Without having taken Vasantsena ?
VITA: She has vanished.
SAMASTHANAKA: How ?
VITA: Like the sight of the blind, like the vigour of the sick.

the reason of the madman, the prosperity of the sluggard, like the wisdom of a thoughtless and profligate scoundrel. At your coming,

She was eclipsed, like love at the sight of an enemy.

SAMASTHANAKA: I will not budge from here until I have seized Vasantsena!

VITA: Have you never heard that

One tames an elephant by chaining him to a post;
One controls a horse by means of a bridle, but
One takes a woman by means of her heart?
If you cannot do this, nothing remains but to go away.

In the following short episode Shudraka shows his power of character delineation as also the witty scene he can contrive. The wile of the masseur and the hard-heartedness of the master of the gambling house, Mathura, are vividly etched.

VOICES: Ho there, sir! There goes a gambler who is running away without paying the ten pieces of gold that he lost! Stop him! Wretch, I can see you from here! (*Enter a Masseur, flinging aside the curtain. He is terrified.*)

MASSEUR: Incredible! What a misfortune to be addicted to gambling! Ah, those dice kicked me like a she-mule that has been turned loose to frisk in the pasture. That last shot pierced me as Ghatotkacha was transfixed by Karna. When I saw that the keeper of the gambling-house was occupied with a score, I hurriedly slipped away; but now that I am out here in the middle of the street, where, oh, where can I find refuge? While the keeper of the gambling-house, accompanied by one of the players, is looking for me in an-

other direction, I must save myself by walking backwards into that empty temple where I can play the role of god. (*Suiting gestures to words, he enters the temple and assumes the indicated posture. Enter Mathura accompanied by a gambler.*)

MATHURA: Ho there, sir ! There goes a gambler who is running away without paying the ten pieces of gold that he lost ! Stop him ! Stop him ! Wretch, I can see you from here !

GAMBLER: You could descend into the deepest hell or climb to the side of the King of Heaven to seek refuge; not Siva himself could save you from the keeper of a gambling-house.

MATHURA: Where, where are you hiding, you thief, you who have just cheated an experienced keeper of gambling-houses, and who are trembling with fright ? You who run trembling and stumbling with each step along your uneven path ! O You who befoul your own name and the name of your family !

GAMBLER: *(examining the footprints)* He came thus far—but here the trail is lost.

MATHURA: *(examining attentively)* Ah ! Footprints which shows that he walked backwards ! And there's a temple in which there is no idol. (*reflecting*) The scoundrel entered it backwards !

GAMBLER: Let's look for him there.

MATHURA: Agreed! *(They enter the temple, look about and indicate by gestures that they detect the imposture.)*

GAMBLER: Why look here ! This statue is made of wood.

MATHURA: By no means ! By no means ! It's stone. (*He shakes the Masseur, making gestures of understanding.*)

Well, anyway, let's have a game here. (*They play at dice.*)

MASSEUR: *(to himself, while striving to repress the emotions produced by a strong desire to gamble)* Alas! The moneyless man who hears the rattle of dice feels a sudden transport like that of a dethroned king who hears the drums beating the call to arms. No, I shall never play again; I am resolved, for it would be as well to throw myself from the summit of Meru as to grasp the dice. Yet their sound is as sweet as the song of the Kokila.

GAMBLER: It's my turn! It's my turn!

MATHURA: No, no! It's my turn!

MASSEUR: *(suddenly leaving his position and leaping forward)* No, no! It's *my* turn!

GAMBLER: Our man is caught!

MATHURA: *(seizing him)*: Now, you scoundrel, you are caught. Produce the ten pieces of gold.

MASSEUR: I will give them to you today.

MATHURA: Give them to me immediately.

MASSEUR: I'll pay you all right, but don't be so violent.

MATHURA: Come on! Pay at once!

MASSEUR: Oh! I am fainting! *(He falls to the ground. They beat and kick him.)*

MATHURA: There, (*drawing a circle in the dust about the fallen Masseur*) now you are trapped in the Gambler's Circle!

MASSEUR: (*arising despondently*) Oh, Oh! I am trapped in the Gambler's Circle! Alas! That binds one inescapably to his obligation. Where can I find money to pay what I must pay?

MATHURA: Well, give bail!

MASSEUR: Very well, I shall. *(Taking the Gambler's hand)* If he will let half of the debt go, I'll promise to give half of it to you.

GAMBLER: All right.

MASSEUR: *(going to Mathura)* So I give you security for half my debt, will you consider half of it paid ?

MATHURA: Very well. I see nothing wrong with that.

MASSEUR: *(Loudly)*: So, sir, you consider half of it paid ?

MATHURA: Yes.

MASSEUR: *(to the gambler)* And you take my promise for half of it.

GAMBLER: Yes.

MASSEUR: I may as well go now.

MATHURA: The ten pieces of gold ! Where are you going ?

MASSEUR: Do you see, sirs, do you see ? I gave one of them security for half of my debt, and the other one took my promise for half of it. What more can they want from me ?

One of the great joys of *The Little Clay Cart* for the modern reader is the restrained quality of Shudraka's poetic expression. Alone among the Sanskrit dramatists he does not indulge in over-luxuriant lyricism. And in that sense he is a far-cry from Kalidasa. Of course the theme and content of *Shakuntala* and *The Little Clay Cart* so widely differ, the one a tender romance and the other a mundane comedy, that it must necessarily be so. And yet when one compares the poetics of Shudraka with those of later dramatists, his terseness and moderation stand out against these later absurdities. Consider, for example, the simplicity in this poetic description :

> The storm-cloud is like a conquering king who invades a hostile land; it advances on the wings of the wind; its flying arrows are heavy drops of rain; its drums are the rumbling of thunder, its banner the flashes of lightning; and in the citadel of its vanquished enemy it plunders the moon of its light.

Or the pithy quality of Vasantasena's rebuke to lightning as she sets out to meet her lover,

> If the cloud must thunder, then let him thunder; cruel were men ever; but, O Lightning, can it be that you too do not know the pangs of a woman's love ?

Bhavabhuti

Some two centuries after Kalidasa another great dramatist arose upon the Indian scene. His name was Bhavabhuti. He was a scholarly Brahmin familiar with grammar, rhetoric and logic. Indeed in his plays he displays his power over these subjects with some disconcerting results on their dramatic construction. Consequently he wrote with less of lyrical elegance than Kalidasa or of wit than Shudraka but with more of passion and he, too, like Bhasa often dispensed with the rigid tenets of the *Natyashastra*. Bhavabhuti has left three works two of which may be called historical-mythological, *Mahavira-charita* and *Uttararama-charita*, both dealing with the *Ramayana*, and the third a romance, *Malati-Madhav*.

Malati-Madhav is in essence like all other Romeo-Juliet type romances of star-crossed lovers to be found in all literatures and

languages through the ages although its ending unlike the others is a happy union of the lovers. However, it also differs in several other respects. The obstacle in the way of the lovers Malati and Madhav is not family or community disapproval but rather a courtier who himself wants to marry Malati and devises many plots and stratagems to thwart them. Royal intervention also frustrates them. But all ends well. Bhavabhuti, alas, uses too often the contrivance of the convenient accident to push his story along. Also for once we find horrible and supernatural elements introduced in a play of this epoch which normally abjured such devices.

The other two plays *Mahavira-charita* (which may be translated as the History of a Great Warrior, that is, Rama) and *Uttara-rama-charita* (the later history of Rama) are not episodes from the epic *Ramayana* but the epic itself. The first play encompasses the fourteen years from Rama's winning of Sita to his defeating the demon Ravana and destroying his country, Lanka. The second play deals with the next twelve years of agony and reconciliation from the time that Sita's chastity while in the captivity of Ravana is popularly suspect and she is consequently banished, to the finale when all doubts are cleared and Rama unites with her and their twin sons, Lava and Kusha.

In taking up an epic so popularly known and so much entwined in the tradition and lives of the people, Bhavabhuti denied himself much scope for invention or originality. Yet he managed to manoeuvre for himself quite an innovation or two. For instance instead of a mere traditional unfolding of the events as popularly known he makes of the *Mahavira-charita* a classic feud of Ravana against Rama beginning as early as the time when Rama has just met Sita and is far from marrying her. In the

Uttararama-charita, Bhavabhuti uses a device of "family-album" reminiscences, as it were, to bring the action up-to-date and proceeds through episodic illusion and reality to continue with his story. But despite such ingenuity and powerful poetry and evocatory eloquence the effort to span fourteen and twelve eventful years makes the plays long on speech and short on action. In dramatic terms they must have been rather uninteresting.

Vishakhadatta

Another two hundred years later, in the 9th century A.D. came the last of the Big Five of Sanskrit drama—Vishakhadatta. We have only one record of his works, if he wrote any other plays at all. It is called *Mudra-rakshasa* or the *Signet Ring of Rakshasa*. Its interest for us lies not only in that it is a great play but also that it is so different from almost all other Sanskrit plays. And hence together with the plays of Bhasa, Kalidasa, Shudraka and Bhavabhuti it completes a representative cross-section of Sanskrit drama.

Mudra-rakshasa is a play of political intrigue and Vishakhadatta writes as a dramatist and not a composer of a poetic pot-pourri. For one thing the plot is rich in incident and action, the dialogue pointed and direct, the language unvarnished though forceful. Only rarely does Vishakhadatta resort to poetic fancy and where he does it is subdued and controlled.

Although Rakshasa, a minister in the court of the Nandas, is the main protagonist of the play, a fascinating aspect is the introduction of his antagonist who is none other than Chanakya, famed in Indian history for his skill in diplomatic dialectic and Machiavellian intrigue. Chanakya, who is an implacable foe of

the Nandas, has, in collusion with the prince Chandragupta, secured the murder of Nanda. Rakshasa, the loyal minister of Nanda, resolved to avenge this murder, organises a number of plots to do away with Chanakya. Chanakya, however, sees much merit in Rakshasa and is himself resolved to win him over to his side. To achieve this he manages through spies and stratagems and the use of Rakshasa's signet ring to rouse the suspicion of the prince with whom Rakshasa has taken sanctuary. The prince consequently dismisses him. In this plight Rakshasa hears that a friend Chandandasa is about to be put to death by Chanakya. This is another trick of Chanakya to draw out Rakshasa. Rakshasa, in order to save his friend, himself surrenders to his enemies, Chanakya and Chandragupta. Much to his surprise instead of punishing him they offer him the prime-ministership. They thus end up as friends.

Vishakhadatta employs his skill as a dramatist not only for some extraordinarily well-drawn characters, particularly Rakshasa and Chanakya who make perfect foils and provide some high moments in their confrontation, but also to give us a vivid idea of shady intrigues and wily plots contrived in the name of diplomacy as it was known in his time. There is also the consistent portrayal of fidelity to friend, cause and principle as a basic virtue of life.

4

The Decline of Sanskrit Drama

BETWEEN THESE GREAT dramatists and in the years to come there were many other Sanskrit playwrights. Some like Harsha, who wrote *Ratnavali,* and Rajashekhara, who wrote *Balaramayana,* retain some fame but many others are known only to pedants and scholars. These later playwrights neither had much dramatic power or vision, nor were they bold enough to break out from accepted codes. Their works were stilted and pedestrian, lacking in dramatic tension, overloaded with sentiment and full of lyrical effusions and more and more unreal as theatre pieces. The dramatists seemed more intent on displaying their poetic virtuosity or their command over rhetoric and complicated constructions. Sanskrit drama was clearly in a stage of decadence and on the decline and seemed destined for the museum.

Many built-in and external factors also contributed toward this decline. The negative aspect of the Indian genius for codification and rigidity began to assert itself. Authors stuck closely to the epics in content and to the rules of the *Natyashastra* in form and style. The deadening hold of the grammarians began to be dominant. At this time, the 9th to the 12th centuries, there was

much ferment in Indian society and life particularly in the North. The Prakrits, that is the popular languages, were beginning to acquire their own literature and Sanskrit, always the language of the nobility, was becoming even more remote from the people. A popular audience might have exercised some salutary check on the dramatist's preoccupation with literary rather than dramatic form. But as we have seen at the best of times his audience was mainly from the refined class whose effete aesthetic sensibilities were sharper than any other attribute; in time to come the audience seems to have been mainly of the men of learning who were less interested in drama as an art-form and more in its literary finesse and adherence to dry rules. This restricted in-group simply offered no motivation to the dramatist. All this is not to say that Sanskrit plays ceased to be written; indeed, quite surprisingly a whole crop of them were written almost right down to the 19th century. But this was perhaps more because of the force of tradition, reverence to the classical language and the status symbol it offered any writer with pretensions to literary ability. The artificial quality of these plays is only too painfully evident. Sanskrit plays are still enacted with persistent regularity today in many places in the North, notably Ujjain, and in the South, notably in Trichur.

Beyond these specific reasons was also something less tangible and more fundamental which seems to strike all civilisations. Towards the close of an epoch the psyche which raises a civilisation rapidly begins to lose its creative drive. Though Indian society stood firm in the face of new challenges and ferments blowing in steadily from the time of Alexander's bid for conquest in 4 B.C. a fatal flaw was beginning to course the sophisticated cultural life-stream of the people. The first millenium of the

Christian era sees much ebullience in India but there is also a contradictory undertow sapping the creative restlessness of the country.

It is a popular notion that the conquest of India by the Mughals and the introduction of Islam finally dealt the death-blow to Indian theatre. The argument is that the Mughals as Muslims frowned upon anthropomorphic representation on the stage and that their austere attitude to life discouraged entertainment. A closer examination of the conditions in India shows how wrong this notion can be.

The Mughal conquest of India was nothing new. The country had known innumerable invasions, incursions and conquests for many centuries before. The Iranians, Greeks, Parthians, Bactrians, Scythians, Kushans, Huns, and Turks had come. True, their influence was short-lived and their impact was felt only in North India or even just parts of it. But they were either repelled or the ocean that was India absorbed them. In this time there was great vigour in the nation's life and culture developed not only within the confines of the country but spread out to neighbouring countries. This was the time that Buddhism was making its inroads in the countries of East Asia, Burma, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam and Thailand, while from the South traders were penetrating Malaya, Cambodia, Ceylon and Indonesia. Whether Buddhist or Hindu they carried with them India's culture and aesthetic concepts. These appear to have been accepted without resistance and indeed with great enthusiasm. Travelling further East, Indian concepts even penetrated through China and Korea as far as Japan. The Bugaku dances and the Gagaku music show strong affinities to Indian inspiration. The gesture, style and melody can be traced to Indian counterparts. Ironically today some

of the most authentic examples of classical Indian dance and drama are to be found in these lands rather than in the country of their origin. And yet in this period of a thousand years which saw the Golden Age of India under the Gupta Empire is also discernible signs of decay. As Jawaharlal Nehru says, as the millenium approached its end, "the glow of the morning had long faded away, high noon was past. In the South there was still vitality and vigour and this lasted some centuries more; in the Indian colonies abroad there was aggressive and full-blooded life right up to the middle of the next millenium. But the heart seems to petrify, its beats are slower, and gradually this petrifaction and decay spread to the limbs... The sense of curiosity and the spirit of mental adventure give place to a hard and formal logic and a sterile dialectic."

This millenium ended around the 10th century A.D. It was about a century later that the first Afghan invasion by Mahmud of Ghazni, a Turk, took place, and Islam came to India as a political force. However, it must be stressed that Islam had come to India over three hundred years earlier peacefully, as a religion and had found its place in the country. At the height of the Arab-Persian renaissance which held sway from Sind in the East to Spain in the West with Baghdad as its centre contacts between India and the Arab world flourished at the level of trade, commerce and culture. Scholars freely travelled between the two areas and the Arabs absorbed much that India had to give in literature, science, mathematics and astronomy. Missionaries of Islam also came to India to spread the new faith. There is no record that they were welcomed with anything but warmth. A number of mosques were built.

Mahmud of Ghazni did not set up any empire in India; he

ruled only a part of the north and west; thirty years later he was dead and for the next 130 years there was no invasion of India. The Afghans and Turko-Mongols who came later set up *sultanates* but they made India their home and were in no sense foreign rulers. In the 14th century Timur caused the first big jolt by sacking Delhi and returning along a trail of blood and gore. North India remained weak for years till in 1526 Babar invaded India and laid the foundation of the Mughal Empire in India.

We see then that more than five hundred years elapsed from the time that the classical cultural movement and with it Sanskrit drama became moribund and the time that Mughal rule was firmly established.

The Mughal, unlike the British to come, did not remain foreign for long. Even Babar forsook his homeland in Afghanistan and became Indianised. His sons and successors became even more a part and parcel of India and had no contacts whatsoever with the land of their forebears. Far from being austere or narrow in their approach to life the Mughals, save for the last, Aurangzeb, in fact, were much given to stimulating the aesthetic experience and their patronage was bounteous. In this epoch we find that architecture, painting, music, literature, poetry and dance once again flourished with splendid and abiding results. A new renaissance was born and at its height in Akbar's reign Indian culture with its great capacity for assimilation and synthesis reached a highwater mark anew.

But drama alone was untouched by this latest manifestation of cultural vitality. In viewing this statement, however, one must rather carefully understand the qualification with which it is made. By drama, I mean essentially, the "legitimate", urban, so-

phisticated theatre that Sanskrit drama was. For the decline of Sanskrit drama did not mean the decline of drama in India altogether. As we saw earlier the growth of the Prakrits made Sanskrit rather irrelevant and these popular languages threw up their own literatures and with it came a strong, pervasive and extremely tenacious folk theatre which survived the onslaught of time and historical circumstances and exists, even thrives, right down to this day in many parts of the country. The Mughal renaissance did not bring forth a court, boulevard or popular urban theatre to take the place of the inanimate Sanskrit theatre.

Why was this so? I think the answer, perhaps, lies in the internal factors that make up the Indian personality rather than the external factors that impinge upon it. In the long history of India whether during the period of the Indo-Gangetic civilisation or the Golden Age of the Guptas or the Mughal epoch we find that while in social organisation Indian society tended to subordinate the individual to the group yet at other levels, religious, spiritual and cultural, the Indian—particularly the sophisticated Indian—was always an individualist. And so it is that we find that those arts which do flourish best in each epoch are individualistic rather than group enterprises. Painting, sculpture and poetry are of course individualistic. But vocal music, for example, is always of one singer—the choir is unknown; instrumental music of one player—the orchestra is unheard of; dance is chiefly of one dancer—the ballet or ensemble is never developed. Even Sanskrit drama, when examined closely, will be found to be more an individualistic literary effort than the instrument of group action. It is only at the popular, folk level, that group enterprise manifests itself. Thus folk music is group singing, folk dance is ensemble dancing. And that is perhaps why folk

theatre as a group activity has thrived.

And so Sanskrit drama and with it the sophisticated urban theatre of the North entered into a long sleep—a twilight zone between life and death—lasting nearly 950 years.

5

The Classical Theatre In South India

THE RICHNESS AND abundance of the Aryan heritage has contributed somewhat to obscuring the Dravidian culture which preceded it in India and continued after the Aryan invasion in the South. As we saw earlier the advent of the Aryans drove this culture southwards and although the Aryans tried to suppress it, or at any rate to discourage it, they were not entirely successful. In time it began to make its own impact on a common cultural pattern and a process of assimilation began. It is thought, for instance, that the *lasya* or graceful, sensuous element in dance and drama is a unique contribution from Dravidian culture. The argument is that this element could only have been introduced by women participants who were never allowed on stage in the Aryan post-vedic and epic eras.

Although the ancient literature of the South, notably Tamil literature, has many references to drama and dramatic performances there is little evidence of the plays themselves or their authors. The literature which carries references to dramatic works

belongs chiefly to the Sangam period which probably was somewhere between 5 B.C. and A.D. 4. Of all the references the most widespread relates to a form known as *kuttu*. This word means play or entertainment but it also has some bearing on dance. We are also told that Tamil literature was divided into three kinds—prose, musical poetry and drama. Dramatic literature is called *nadakkam*, a word which closely corresponds to the Sanskrit *natak*, that is drama. Probably, this word is a late one in the language when there had already been interaction between Sanskrit and Tamil.

Such evidence as we have of ancient drama in the South shows the influence of the *Natyashastra* and of Sanskrit drama. This may simply be due to the fact that earlier authentic South Indian drama may be altogether lost to us. If there was any court, boulevard or urban drama it is also lost. The *kuttu* persists to this day in many forms but all of them are folk. There is the *therukuttu* from what appears to be a wholly rural artistic tradition. Not much of this is available in print except a few fragments in the Tanjore Saraswati Mahal Library and other private collections. Entire plays seem to have been orally handed down. *Therukuttu* literally means street-play and was performed as such on an improvised stage with very few properties and hardly any special costumes. The plays were drawn from the epics and mythology, chiefly the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* showing their post-vedic origin. *Therukuttu* and other forms like the *Pallu, Kuruvanji* and *Nondinatakam* may still be seen in some of the villages of South India to this day.

The most splendid contribution of the South to theatre, and also the most enduring, is dance and dance-drama. Notable among these is *Bharata Natyam, Kathakali, Bhagavata Mela*

Natakam, Yakshagana and *Kuchipudi.*

It is considered that *Bharata Natyam* was once a dance-drama form but later constricted itself into a solo dance performed by women and chiefly confined to temples. It had almost vanished at one point but during the present century, no more than in three decades, was resuscitated and brought into secular pre-eminence as never before.

The *Bhagavata Mela Natakam, Yakshagana* and *Kuchipudi* are derivations of the old classical *Bharata Natyam,* but they are sturdily dramatic in form employing many dancers and having their own special dazzlingly wonderful and elaborate costumes and make-up. Although the *Bhagavata Mela Natakam* originally came from Tamilnad its greatest manifestation is in Andhra Pradesh which is also the home of *Yakshagana* and *Kuchipudi.* On the contrary *Kathakali* is a product of Kerala and perhaps the most vigorous of all Indian dance-drama forms.

The essence of all these dramatic forms is the marriage of drama, dance, mime, gesture and music. In that sense it may be said to come nearest to total theatre. The stories in these dance-dramas are invariably from the epics, the puranas and other mythological classics. It is only in the past two or three decades that themes from other sources including some from contemporary life have been experimented with. I shall, however, deal with this in a later Chapter. The costumes and make-up magnify the characters not only physically but also qualitatively in terms of their characterisation. The language and utterance are secondary to the performance—the emphasis is on interpretation through gesture and mime. The dramatic content, again, is in the unfolding of a tale or the depiction of a situation or an emotion. A character enacting a role also performs all these

other functions. Necessarily then a dramatic situation through tension is unsustainable. We cannot, therefore, conceive of this dance-drama merely as a drama enacted through dance. To that extent to identify it with European ballet is wholly wrong.

Perhaps because the South till the 17th century was comparatively tranquil, theatre maintained a more or less unbroken continuity. It was at this point that new forces appeared on the scene to give the South its first and rudest shock.

6

Night-ride and Sun-rise

THE JOLT WHICH shook the South, then spread to the East and finally shattered the entire country, was the European invasion. For the first time in thousands of years India was invaded not through the traditional passes in the north-west but by sea from the South. It began peaceably enough by sea-faring adventurers from Portugal, France and England. These adventurers came not as military conquerors to set up empires but as traders though they soon unfurled their flags. The 17th and 18th centuries saw a tremendous struggle for supremacy in India. The Western nations, British, French and Portuguese, fought amongst themselves on the one hand and they fought the Indians on the other. The Mughal Empire whose writ ran throughout the land in the reign of Akbar had become enfeebled in the hundred years of his successors.

Akbar was a great and liberal monarch and in the heydey of his rule he sought the synthesis of the various cultures and peoples that made India. His court burgeoned a great renaissance in art, literature, music and dance. He encouraged talent without discrimination, he proferred no religious favour. He

was as secular as an emperor in his time could be. His son and grandson were half-Mughal and half-Rajput Hindu. The Mughal dynasty lost even the faintest trace of its alien origin and became wholly Indian.

Because Akbar had so firmly consolidated the empire, his son Jehangir and grandson Shah Jehan were able to rule successfully. They accepted the framework in which they found themselves. But good men as they were, they were inadequate and did not possess that breadth of vision nor the elan necessary to hold a gigantic empire together. Aurangzeb, the last of the major Mughal emperors was a more capable man but he was cruel, bigoted, austere and puritanical. He alienated large sections of his nation, and tried to undo everything that Akbar had so assiduously built up. The Mughal Empire, already shaky began to totter. Aurangzeb's death in 1707, all but finished this Empire. His successors are insignificant, shadowy figures in history and the last of them ended his days in humiliation. The Rajputs, the Marathas and Muslim rulers like Haidar Ali and his son Tippu Sultan in the South were smarting to unleash themselves and constantly creating trouble. Even the Mughal viceroys and satraps, far from the imperial presence, would often set up their own domains. These were unsettled times, when the British having defeated and practically expelled their European rivals set out seriously to establish their authority throughout India. The hundred years after the death of Aurangzeb thus saw all over India a complex and chequered power struggle involving victories and defeats, heroic battles and sordid treacheries, partisan warfare and unprincipled butchery as the British slowly but surely laid the foundation of a new empire. It was a time when art and culture could barely exist much less flourish.

In 1818 the last nationalistic resistance was snuffed out and India once again came under alien rule. But this time it was quite different from all those which preceded it. The British were more systematic and superior in their oppression and more sophisticated in their repression. But more than that they were unique in their total alienation with their subject peoples unlike even the French, Dutch and Portuguese. This was especially so after the 1857 war of Independence, otherwise known as the Mutiny. Earlier conquests of India had led to the rulers accepting the social and cultural milieu which they found and merging into it so that in a short time they became part of India and Indians. Their alien roots died and they struck fresh ones in their new land. Not so the British. They came as rulers and stayed as rulers. They maintained an unbridgeable gulf between themselves and the Indian people in tradition, outlook and living. India was to them a slave country of slave peoples. After 1857, frightened by the violence of the uprising they put it down with barbarous ferocity and withdrew even closer into their shell. The British had looked upon India not as a new land to live and settle upon, but rather as a prize from which to cart treasure back to their home country. The social, economic and political advancement of the country was of interest to them only so far as it helped in their own enrichment. The constant impress of their superiority compared with the Indians necessarily became an important point of policy to keep the peoples down. The British used the potent means of ridicule and contempt to achieve this end. Thus the Indian way of living was characterised as uncivilised, the Indian intellect was considered backward, Indian culture—its painting, sculpture, music, dance, drama, literature—was derided as ludicrous, grotesque, absurd or simply laughable. The superiority of British or

Western civilisation was constantly driven home. Under a heavy and sustained barrage of such propaganda, apart from many positive steps taken by the British to suppress any signs of creativity, it was indeed difficult for art and culture to make headway in this inhospitable climate.

Since the British never colonised India in the sense in which they did America or South Africa and since they kept aloof from the mainstream of Indian life, they soon found that to hold and administer such a vast country, apart from various imperialistic devices, they would need the collaboration of the Indians themselves. Inevitably the Indians had to be educated in English, taught a modicum of English ideas of administration and governance.

Bengal which had been longest under British rule, next to the South, was quick to capitalise on this opportunity of opening its windows to the fresh winds blowing from the West. European culture was studied with avidity and new stirrings of creativity began to sprout. The British unconsciously helped in this when they set up theatres in Calcutta for themselves. Oddly enough it was a Russian, Gerasim Lebedeff, who did much to help found a new Bengali theatre. After many vicissitudes Lebedeff ran foul of the British authorities and was deported. But a new movement was born.

In the north Lucknow was the cultural centre and as early as 1853 Urdu drama received a great fillip when Amanat, the court poet of the Oudh ruler Wajid Ali Shah, wrote an operatic play called *Indar Sabha*. It was a play without much of a plot relying chiefly on song and extravaganza. Reports say that Wajid Ali Shah himself took the leading part with the women of his harem acting as fairies. It was not a great play but it is an important

landmark because it kept alive the spirit of drama and even encouraged many others to write other such plays. From this movement may also be traced the beginnings of the Parsi theatre which flourished in later years in Bombay.

At about the time that Urdu drama was getting a new lease of life a great author, also in the north, Bharatendu was fashioning drama as a form in Hindi literature. His best known play is *Satya Harishchandra* taken from the epics although he wrote many other plays dealing with his contemporary life and problems. The form he chose, however, was in the classical tradition. Another great contribution he made was to inspire and encourage a sturdy amateur theatre movement in Hindi. In consequence a whole school of playwrights arose whose works bear the strong influence of their master. In later years another brilliant Hindi dramatist, Jaya Shankar Prasad, was to arise to challenge the very basis of the approaches of Bharatendu. But in accentuating on lyricism and subtle, even high-flown, expression, he made of theatre less a craft of the stage and more of a poetic experience.

The second half of the 19th century, then, sees many valiant attempts to revive the theatre in India. In the contradictory nature of British rule in India the theatre movement received both encouragement and discouragement.

7

Transition

AFTER THE REVOLT of 1857, the British set about in earnest to consolidate their hold on India and in the process broke up the old order and created new vested interests and quisling classes mutually hostile to each other so that one could be played against the other. They also brought about more sucessfully than any other regime in the past the political unification of the country. This was done through a tight and extremely efficient administration. But inevitably as representatives of an industrial civilisation and hence of change and revolution they brought technological innovations which had a profound effect on the more sophisticated and intellectual levels of Indian society. The printing press particularly, although introduced with great reluctance, did much to stimulate the growth of popular Indian languages and permitted diffusion hitherto not possible. This in turn popularised new literature. Thus in many ways the result of political unification and technology engendered dynamic forces embracing social, political, national and artistic consciousness. In time, the Indian elite, if it can be so called, looked both outward to the West and inward to its own great past and heritage. The outward

look with its promise of new and progressive ideas also emphasised the helplessness in bondage, while the inward look with its assurance of past greatness gave hope and courage for the future. Of course the ferment released never touched a mass base but at least at the urban level it affected sizeable numbers.

The Bengali Theatre

Working then under severe limitations theatre in India entered a sort of awakening in transition. As we saw earlier, the first to react to the new influences were the Bengalis. The theatre which Lebedeff set up with the assistance of his Bengali tutor, Golaknath Dass was active around 1795. But after Lebedeff's departure it vanished. Its impact on Bengal was not immediately felt. Several decades passed before new attempts were made to renew a Bengali theatre. However, in the intervening period many private theatres were formed but they mainly staged English plays. It is interesting to note that one of the first of such plays to be staged by the Bengalis was Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar,* a production by Prasanna Kumar Tagore in 1831. But the lack of suitable plays was acutely felt and the main reliance, as new theatres came up, was on translations of English or Sanskrit plays. A great breakthrough was made in 1857 when an original Bengali play written by Ramnarayan Tarkaratna, *Kulina-Kulasarvasva,* was produced. The significance of this event was fourfold: it was an original play; it dealt with a contemporary problem, polygamy; it heralded a great Bengali dramatist, and it set the Bengali stage upon a foundation which ensured it, a more or less continuous tradition down to this day. An interesting sequel of Tarkaratna's advent into the theatre world was that

another work of his, a Bengali translation of a Sanskrit play, *Ratnavali,* sparked off one of Bengal's greatest litterateurs and dramatists, Michael Madhusudan Dutt. Dissatisfied with *Ratnavali,* Dutt wrote a play himself called *Sharmishtha* which at once won him renown. He followed this up with several other plays, comedies and tragedies, all of which only set the seal upon his greatness. There followed a period which saw a great proliferation of theatres and dramatic performances as the popular Bengali appetite for drama seemed insatiable. In this period which lasted into the early years of our century a number of remarkable writers, producers and actors were spawned. Notable among them was Dinabandhu Mitra whose play *Nildarpan* dealing with the crushing oppression of the indigo plantation workers by their European masters, created a sensation for its dramatic style, its contemporary realism and its social protest, an unheard of thing under imperialism. Another figure who strode the stage literally and metaphorically was Girishchandra Ghosh, an actor and producer whose Great National Theatre staged a number of plays with patriotic themes. This theatre even ventured forth beyond the confines of Calcutta to places like Delhi, Agra and Lahore. Three other writers who did a great deal to contribute to the popularity of the theatre in Bengal were Amritlal Basu who wrote a number of satires. Dwijendralal Ray who wrote historical plays and Kshirodprasad Vidyavinod who also wrote historical plays including the famous *Alamgir* which secured all-India fame. A notable feature of the Bengali theatre of this time was that it had actresses playing women's roles. In later years great writers like Bankimchandra and Saratchandra Chatterjee made a profound impact upon Bengali belles-lettres but curiously few took to the play as the forte of expression, though

dramatisations of their novels have proved singularly popular. Great actors of the calibre of Sisirkumar Bhaduri and Ahindra Chaudhuri did much to keep the Bengali tradition alive but it was not until the mid-twentieth century that fresh talents would bring a new wave to the theatre of Bengal.

The Parsi Theatre

Across the land to the West in Bombay the Parsis in this epoch had quarried from the shambles of Wajid Ali Shah's short-lived theatrical edifice a new theatre in the Urdu language. In retrospect we are apt to deplore this Parsi theatre, as it was called, for its blood and thunder high-key melodrama, its unabashed hybridisation of Western and Oriental forms, its insouciant plagiarisation, its bewildering concatenation of verse, song, dialogue, irrelevant comic interludes and miracles and its garish decor. But it was a remarkably robust and vigorous movement which flourished for well over a half century and influenced certain sections of the Indian theatre for many years thereafter. In fact the backwash of the Parsi theatre style is still evident today in most Indian films. I do not think, however, that with our hindsight it is easy to dismiss the Parsi theatre perfunctorily. Its role in sustaining the theatre movement is considerable and if we were to examine the contemporaneous theatre in the West rather closely we would also find a surprising lack of our modern finish, subtlety, sophistication and realism, profundity and purpose. And not surprisingly, for after all the Parsi theatre relied for most of its theatricality very closely on European or rather British models. We tend to think of English drama chiefly in terms of Shakespeare, Marlowe, Sheridan and so on

with their elegance of diction and delivery, and their polish of posture. But the popular English drama of the late 19th century was much more than these. By and large the repertoire of this theatre advanced chiefly by the itinerant and provincial companies included fatuous farces, contrived thrillers, low tragedy, imitation comedy of manners and extravaganzas, plays by playwrights who have both gone into limbo. It is these mainly which came to the shores of India to amuse, entertain and elevate the emigré English. A list of the plays staged in Bombay and Calcutta gives us some idea of the level of drama to which the Indians were exposed and from which the producers of the Parsi theatre drew their inspiration : *Heir at Law, Who Wants a Guinea?, A Cure for the Heart Ache, Midnight Moon, Weathercock, Miss in Her Teens, Raising The Wind,* and *Fortune's Frolic.* An occasional Shakespeare was thrown in. Of course not all Indians had a chance to see all these plays for often the theatre admitted only the British.

The Parsi theatre was the first, and perhaps the only, commercialized, mass-entertainment medium in Indian theatre's long drawn history. It spared no pains to extract the last ounce of mass appeal in its productions and in many ways remarkably anticipated the grosser box-office values of its successor, the film. Its initiator was a shrewd and resourceful man named Pestonji Framji who started the "Original Theatrical Company" around 1870. His success led to the establishment of as many as six other flourishing companies, some of them breakaways from earlier groups. Although Bombay was their base, these companies travelled widely over North India and one of them, the Victoria Theatrical Company of Khurshidji Balliwala, even ventured as far as Britain!

Because the Parsi theatre was so candidly commercial it simply had no pretensions to art, culture, dedication to heritage and so on. Its prime consideration was to get popular plays popularly played.

The producers of the Parsi theatre cast their net wide in search of themes for their plays. The existing Indian plays were not of much use to them because they were unsuitable to their purpose. So they set about pilfering themes from the Indian epics and mythology which they knew had a great hold on the Indian peoples or from popular Persian romantic tragedies which appealed to the sentimental Indians or from Western plays which could provide the necessary floss. Shakespeare was especially a great favourite though the bard would have been considerably astonished by the transmogrification of his work. *Hamlet, The Merchant of Venice, Romeo and Juliet, Julius Caesar* emerged in adaptations with locale, names and dialogues changed out of recognition to suit the local need and understanding. Some of the other famous plays of the Parsi theatre were *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* from the Indian epics, *Rustom-e-Sohrab, Shirin Farhad, Laila Majnu,* romances and tragedies from Persian sources, *Hatim Tai,* an adventure story on the lines of Sindbad the Sailor and various assorted romances like *Shahid-i-Naz (Martyr of Love), Said-i-Hawas (Prisoner of Lust), Khwab-i-Hasti (The Dream of Life)* and so on. To begin with the Parsi producers either wrote their own scripts or employed unknown hacks to write for them. But later known writers were called upon to write and their authorship acknowledged. Consequently a number of playwrights acquired renown, notably Mian Zarif, Talib, Betab and the most famous of them all Agha Hashr and Imtiaz Ali Taj. Only rarely did the Parsi theatre step out of

escapism into purpose. Daryabadi in a play *Zood Pasheman (Early Repentance)* attacked child marriage and Sharar dealt with the purdah system in *Mewai Talkh (Bitter Fruit)*. The occasional political play like Krishan Chand Zeba's *Zakhme Punjab (Bleeding Punjab)* dealing with the woes of the Punjab came to grief when it was banned by the British Government. But it did show that Urdu playwrights and even the Parsi theatre could not wholly divorce themselves from popular issues.

The decline of the Parsi theatre came with the advent of the film. Or rather it would be more accurate to say that with the advent of the film the Parsi theatre transformed itself into the new medium of the cinema. Most of the actors and actresses (like the Bengali theatre the Parsis employed women) went over to films as did many producers. The Bombay film at one time was almost monopolised by the Parsi enterpreneur. In time the theatre vanished in the same way it had arisen—for purely pragmatic reasons : the film had become a better commercial proposition.

Other Regional Theatres

The history and fortunes of the theatre in other parts of India in the second half of the 19th century bears much the same impress as the Bengali theatre though perhaps with less passion and fervour. There was the dependence on plays of Sanskrit origin or based on epic themes. When original plays were written they followed much the same pattern of dealing with social or religious rather than political and economic issues. Acting styles, scenery, length of plays also conformed to the Bengal model although this is not to say that they copied it consciously. By and

large there was a uniform theatre manifestation throughout the country. It would have been difficult to single out the theatre of any region as showing characteristics uniquely different from other regions—in quality perhaps yes, but in all other ways no, save one. Only the Bengali and Parsi theatre had actresses—in all other regions men took feminine roles, some like Bhaurao Kolhatkar in Maharashtra and Jayashankar in Gujarat with such remarkable virtuosity that audiences were amazed that they could be men!

The Gujarati Theatre

The Gujarati theatre was more or less a shadow of the Parsi theatre which began with the Gujarati language but later went over almost wholly to Urdu. It was only at this point that a true Gujarati theatre could come into its own. Its centres were Bombay, Ahmedabad and Baroda. But many of the repertory companies travelled a great deal among the other towns of Gujarat and Saurashtra. Although a large number of companies performed plays it never had the richness and vigour of the Marathi theatre, the region closest to it geographically and emotionally, nor did it throw up many outstanding personalities till the present century. Some of the better-known figures like Ranchhodbhai Udayaram, Waghaji Asharam, Dahyabhai Jhaveri and Nrisinha Vibhakar were famed only locally. It was during the early years of this century that men like K. M. Munshi and Chandravadan Mehta brought new dimensions to the Gujarati theatre and made their impact beyond the confines of their region.

In a life devoted to many pursuits of national development

Munshi's work in the theatre chiefly as a writer has been only incidental but sufficiently significant to merit mention. He saw in the theatre a powerful instrument for the projection of social and political ideas brimming over as the national movement gained ground. Many of his plays deal with the emancipation of women who in Gujerat, although occupying a subtly dominant position, curiously were also under considerable restraint. Other plays dealing with political themes often ran foul of the British authorities.

Chandravadan Mehta has been a prolific writer both for the stage and radio. His plays range in a broad spectrum from the serious to the farcical but his distinctive style is best in sophisticated wit, a projection of his own personality which recognising the severities of existence nevertheless meets them with the rapier of humour rather than the sledge-hammer of denunciation.

Today the Gujerati theatre has acquired a number of talented writers, directors and actors of serious bent who in their search for new directions in the context of Independence have somehow made both Munshi and Mehta rather irrelevant.

Not the least important among the groups who have done much to foster this new theatre have been the Nat Mandal of Gujerat, Mrinalini Sarabhai's Darpana Group and individuals like Mansukh Joshi and Markand Bhatt.

The Marathi Theatre

The Marathi and Kannada theatres offer an interesting example of cross-influence. Although Maharasthra has had a long tradition of itinerant folk singers and folk theatre the beginnings of the urban drama of today may be traced to the year 1843.

At this time, under the patronage of the Mysore royal house, Kannada drama had made notable progress in the Karnatak now known as Mysore State. As usual the plays staged were translated from the Sanskrit classics. There was a lot of communication with adjoining Maharashtra in the north and indeed even to this day at the border it is difficult to draw a fine dividing line between the Marathi and Kannada speaking peoples. It was not uncommon for Kannada plays to be staged in areas of Maharashtra. It is said that in 1843 one such play was produced before the Raja of Sangli who was fired with a determination to develop Marathi theatre in his State. Fortunately for the Raja he had with him a talented young man in his court, Vishnudas Bhave, who was entrusted with organising a theatre. Bhave set about his task with dedication and the foundation he laid was firm and the fillip given to Marathi theatre took it to its high moments for over a half century. The Marathi theatre brought forth a remarkable number of playwrights like Kirloskar, Deval, Kolhatkar, Gadkari, Khadilkar, Warerkar, and actors like Bhonsle and Bal Gandharva whose influence on Indian theatre was considerable. In time it also brought into its fold actresses like Durga Khote, Snehaprabha Pradhan and Jyotsna Bhole who achieved countrywide acclaim. The repertoire of the early Marathi theatre was mythological or devotional plays and translations or adaptations of Western plays chiefly Shakespeare and at least one Moliére. Kelkar, for example, adapted *The Taming of the Shrew* as *Tratika;* Paranjape's *Manajirao* and Deval's *Zunjarrao* were none other than *Macbeth* and *Othello.* But Maharashtra's peculiar contribution to Indian theatre was the *sangeet* drama or musical play. The Marathi theatre had been liberal in its use of song in drama. But these songs were mainly

taken from the Lavani, a corpus of love songs or from the Powada, a ballad form glorifying valour. Kirloskar, however, gave *sangeet* drama a new turn and its true form when he introduced classical music from both the Hindustani or Northern school and Carnatic or Southern school. A highly lyrical theatre was the result and it reached its highwater mark with Bal Gandharva and Keshavrao Bhonsle who stormed Maharashtra with their wonderful singing voices.

In the early years of this century, sangeet drama received a powerful challenge from the Maharashtra Natak Mandali which had within it a number of outstanding theatre promoters, actors and writers—one in particular Kakasaheb Khadilkar. His plays brought great renown to the Mandali. Khadilkar in swinging away from the musical drama wrote in a heroic vein drawing his material chiefly from Maratha history. Most of these plays were politically-oriented since Khadilkar was in the national movement and soon to become a close collaborator of Tilak. His most memorable play was *Keechakavadh* which advocated political liberation even through violent means. Both play and performances were promptly banned.

It is curious, however, that it was another play of Khadilkar's *Swayamvar* dealing with the marraige of Krishna and Rukmini that was responsible for the turn that *sangeet* drama took from light to classical music.

The happiest integration of classical music and dramatic vigour came about around this time with Gadkari's *Ekach Pyala* (Just One Glass), a story of a rising lawyer who, given a drink by his clerk to console him in a mood of depression, finds himself caught in a habit that drags him down to poverty, ruin and annihilation. It is a play which is still staged with great effect.

From the early thirties Anant Kanekar, K. Narayan Kale, P. Y. Altekar and P. K. Atre tried to provide the new stirrings towards a modernity away from the traditional approaches hitherto attempted. They sought to break away from the highly romantic play and thought they had found their necessary inspiration from Ibsen and Shaw. But though their own efforts did not yield as fruitful a result as one might desire the progressive direction they gave to the new playwrights of today is unmistakable.

If one were to accept modernity essentially as a response to Western ideas of the new form of dramatic content it would perhaps be correct to say that while Marathi poetry and the short story were quick to understand and absorb changing trends and experimentation the theatre did not. But a number of dramatic writers were in fact significantly moved towards this new expression. P. L. Deshpande, for instance, though not necessarily influenced by the West, is one of the most contemporaneous writers in the Marathi theatre today. His *Tuze Aahe Tujapashi (To Each His Own)* written in a satirical vein is a penetrating and devastating examination of today's follies in the ideological contest between the uninhibited epicure and the puritanical humbug who clothes himself in Gandhian accents. Deshpande has brought a new breath of life, in an endearingly egoistic style, to Marathi theatre.

Others who appear to be in the vanguard of this new movement in the contemporary Marathi theatre are Vijay Tendulkar, C. T. Khanolkar and Vasant Kanetkar.

The South Indian Theatres

The Kannada theatre which gave the inspiration for Marathi

theatre oddly enough soon lost itself and by the early years of this century was in fact imitating it. Various troupes travelled around the Karnatak region of which the Gubbi theatrical company is the only one memory recalls. A number of people like Varadachar and Vasudevachari Kerur who wrote an adaptation of Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer* kept the theatre going. It was only much later that playwrights of the calibre of T. Kailasam and Sriranga came upon the scene to give the Kannada theatre a shot in the arm.

The shot they gave was to rid the Kannada stage of pure translations either from Sanskrit or English by writing original plays in an environment and idiom familiar to the audience. Kailasam's first play *Tollugathi* on modern education brought a contemporary freshness to the theatre. So did Narayanrao Hiulgol, credited to be the writer of the first modern Kannada play. Along with Sriranga, the pen-name of Adya Rangacharya, they also helped in the resurrection of the theatre through the amateur movement. The professionals had been content with mythological and spectacular insignificant extravaganzas. It was the amateur who had the courage to risk staging the new theatre and showing that the public would accept it too. With more than 28 full-length plays and other smaller pieces Sriranga is considered the greatest Kannada playwright. The twenty-eight plays show the ceaseless searching quality of his genius both in form and content. They also show the maturing mind of the rebel who from iconoclasm rises to a greater, more sublime understanding of the harmony of the universe. His play, *Kelu Janmejaya* is one of the best examples of his craft and rightly has acquired India-wide fame.

The other theatres of the South, Tamil, Telugu and Malaya-

lam existed more or less in fitful fashion contributing little that was original. All these theatres were to await a better day to renew their fortunes.

In Tamilnad, the theatre was considered so lowly a business that no play was staged save in the outskirts of habitation, no educated person would have any truck with it. As in the Kannada theatre it was left to the amateur movement to bring it respectability and strength. This happened over the turn of the century with the setting up of the Suguna Vilas Sabha. It drew young men from the more refined levels of society and a good deal of enterprising talent. Sambanda Mudaliar was the fountain-head of this movement. By the twenties of this century the professional companies were sitting up and taking notice and soon they were even copying acting and production styles. But it was not till contemporary times and the emergence of writers like Ramaiah and Janakiraman and producers like Sahasranamam and the T. K. S. Brothers that contemporary themes and less melodramatic presentation were in evidence.

The same impetus from the amateur movement saved the theatre in Andhra, the land of the Telugu drama. Added to this was the early manifestation of acting talent in the first two decades of this century. A great social drama appeared with Apparao's *Kanyasulkam* which produced a rash of imitations. A decade later a number of patriotic plays were written many of whom were banned. The contemporary Telugu theatre is a scene of incredible prolixity though not much of it can be said to be of the highest standard. People like Abburi Ramakrishna Rao have brought it grace and refinement, and A. R. Krishna a dynamic zeal and organisation.

The fourth area of the South, Kerala, which has contributed

the gorgeous, memorable and durable dance, Kathakali, to Indian theatre arts, nevertheless, has failed to show the same vigour in the legitimate theatre. This is surprising for a state which is far away the most educated in India. A strong Leftist consciousness has released a theatre of the Left though it has yet to establish itself as a significant force.

8

The New Day

Fin-de-Siécle

IN 1885 AN EVENT occured which at the time caused but a faint ripple on the Indian scene. Few would have thought then that this would catch a ground-swell and blow out later into the storm that was the national struggle for independence. The Indian National Congress was formed in that year. But it was then a coterie of well-meaning individuals whose modest aim was to secure some reforms, some participation in governance with the eventual hope of self-government within the British Empire. Its earliest manifesto is couched in polite, loyal language and calls upon the generosity of the British to help in the fulfilment of Indian aspirations.

The Indian intelligentsia and its most dynamic leaders like Ram Mohan Roy, Ramakrishna, Vivekanand, were more concerned with social and religious reforms. Political consciousness and revolutionary ardour were to come much later with Tilak and Gokhale who brought an aggressive outlook into politics and the ultra-left nihilists of Bengal who brought violence into

it. The moderates, however, continued their hold on the people at large for some time, but the British now fully alive to the nascent nationalist movement were everywhere trying to break it. The end of World War I brought tremendous frustration to all classes of Indians and more crushing poverty to many. But the Russian Revolution had a profound impact upon the Indian freedom fighters and visionaries. Although in most history the Great October Revolution and the rise of the Soviet Union with Lenin at its head are dismissed as having passed India by, a closer examination will perhaps reveal that these events had more influence upon Indian intellectuals, and particularly the enlarging proletariat that was being created, than is admitted. Certainly their impress upon individuals so disparate as Jawaharlal Nehru and Rabindranath Tagore was evident and acknowledged. It is a fallacy, I think, to believe, as many people do, that England and English intellectuals and English culture had a monopoly on Indians. In balance, however, it will be seen that the Western impact on Indians was oddly more from the European continent than from Britain even though the contact was indirect. Strindberg, Ibsen, Romain Rolland, Victor Hugo, Dumas, Emile Zola, Anatole France, Molière, Goethe, Marx, Chekhov, Pushkin, Turgenev, Gogol, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Maxim Gorki, Sartre, these are among the many western writers and thinkers whom the conscious Indian intelligentsia have turned to. In theatre the attraction of Ibsen and Chekhov was particularly strong.

Theatre in India reflected the ferment of the times. As the 19th century drew to its close the Bengali and Marathi theatre of purpose were preoccupied with social themes like alcoholism, child marriage, enforced conversion by Christian missionaries, women's

education, the purdah system and widow re-marriage. But by the early 20th century the impact of political factors began to show as the national movement gathered momentum. In the Marathi theatre, Khadilkar's *Keechakavadh,* although retelling an episode from the Indian epic, *Mahabharata,* as we saw, was considered an allegorical satire of the British Government and was banned. In Bengal plays like *Sirajuddaula, Mir Kassim, Chhatrapati Shivaji* drew the ire of the British because they were considered veiled attacks on the imperialist regime through historical allegory. For the first time legislative measures were taken to control dramatic expression. Wide and sweeping powers were given to magistrates and commissioners not only to stop performances but even to pre-censor plays before they were put on the boards. Even Rabindranath Tagore, did not escape suspicion with his play *Raktakarabi (Red Oleanders)* which was thought to be a criticism of the British Government though he himself denied this pointing out that he was concerned with the larger issue of a merciless utilitarian organisation aided by science presaging doom to the individual.

The Theatre of Tagore

Tagore stands as a paradox in the Indian theatre scene. To consider him only as a playwright is to deny him the astonishingly supreme position he holds as a philosopher, poet, educationist, musician and artist. In each field he achieved a remarkable synthesis of East and West. Many of his drawings and paintings done in the early years of this century, for example, anticipate some of the avante-garde works in European art today. And yet there is something unmistakably Indian about them.

As a dramatist Tagore wrote more than forty plays. Yet few of them have been produced, many have not even been understood. Producers shied away from them on one ground or another that they were too poetic, too lyrical, too metaphysical, too symbolic and obscure, too unstageable or just plain boring. Tagore himself was no help to them. His plays carry few, if any, directions but he wrote about his ideas of production in a number of literary pieces. He said things like:

> The art of acting has to be subservient to the poetry.
> The adornment of the stage . . . is a barrier, put up by force, between literature and the art of theatre.
> . . . the adolescent habit of frequent change of scenes and moving the curtain up and down. . . on the one hand mocks outer reality and, on the other, prevents inner truth from emerging.
> If there is too much imitative naturalism the inner view becomes clouded. To express the emotional turmoil of a character the actor very often takes to violent gesture and declamation. The reason, I think, is that he aims at imitating truth instead of expressing it. Like the false witness he has to exaggerate.

After seeing Irving in *Hamlet* in England, Tagore said he was struck dumb because Irving's unrestrained exaggeration of acting completely spoiled the clarity and inner beauty of the play. He was also opposed to long runs because acting the same role in the same play over and over again deadened a true artist's soul. It is not surprising that while few producers were willing to touch Tagore, Tagore himself was not too willing to

have them touch him! He produced most of his own plays embodying his ideals of stagecraft. Many of Tagore's concepts are now familiar to us, even commonplace, but in his time they were alien, odd and bordering on the eccentric. The theatre at that time, astride the turn of the century, was fully committed to the baroque in design and decor and a florid style in acting. Tagore who veered close to the Sanskrit concept of dramaturgy in trying to evoke sentiment and imagery through inner meaning rather than outer manifestation confounded his contemporaries despite all their talk of heritage. Perhaps the producers of the time, particularly the professionals, lacked the intellectual capacity to understand and interpret his plays. It is only in recent times, particularly after the stunning production of *Red Oleanders* by the talented producer Sombhu Mitra and an impressive ballet of *Samanya Kshati (Trifling Loss)* based on a Tagore poem by Uday Shankar, that the true possibilities of interpreting and transferring Tagore to the stage are being realised. Sombhu Mitra has given some interesting explanations of the paradox of Tagore. First, he thinks that Tagore's incredible genius was too overwhelming for people's mental comfort, so they tried to minimise it. Second, the West's lukewarm response to Tagore as a dramatist based on false criteria has misguided Indians, and third, Tagore's true dramatic genius has been distorted by the poor English translations which fail to convey their "warm, tense, passionate" mood in Bengali. The litterateur, Dr Nihar Ranjan Ray goes further in saying that these translations made either by Tagore or by friends and colleagues are "inadequate and not unoften incompetent, qualitatively speaking". This, he emphasises, is true even of translations done by the poet himself. No wonder then that the English literary critic, Edward

Thompson, was led to complain of Tagore's "tiresome insistence on the tremendous significance of the trivial". Since most translations of Tagore's plays in other Indian languages are not directly from the Bengali but through English a wholly wrong impression has persisted.

Despite the distorting prism through which Tagore's plays have been refracted out to the world at least a dozen are well-known in India outside the confines of Bengal, of which at least four are known beyond the country also. These four are *Visarjan (Sacrifice), Raja (The King of the Dark Chamber), Dakghar (Post Office),* and *Raktakarabi (Red Oleanders).* Each of these deals with some of the momentous issues of man and his society.

Visarjan is the clash between temporal and religious authority. Tagore used the issue of the ritual sacrifice of animals in appeasement of the Goddess Kali to heighten the clash. The King Govinda moved by the appeal of a beggar girl whose goat has been sacrificed forbids further slaughter at the temple, thereby drawing the wrath of the high priest Raghupati.

Enter Raghupati, Jaising (his disciple and foster-son) following with a jar of water to wash his feet.

JAISING: Father!
RAGHUPATI: Go!
JAISING: Here is some water.
RAGHUPATI: No need of it!
JAISING: Your clothes.
RAGHUPATI: Take them away!
JAISING: Have I done anything to offend you?
RAGHUPATI: Leave me alone. The shadows of evil have

thickened. The King's throne is raising its insolent head above the temple altar. Ye gods of these degenerate days, are ye ready to obey the King's laws with bowed heads, fawning upon him like his courtiers ? Have only men and demons combined to usurp gods' dominions in this world, and is Heaven powerless to defend its honour ? But there remain the Brahmins, though the gods be absent; and the King's throne will supply fuel to the sacrificial fire of their anger. My child, my mind is distracted.

JAISING: Whatever has happened, father ?

RAGHUPATI: I cannot find words to say. Ask the Mother Goddess who has been defied.

JAISING: Defied ? By whom ?

RAGHUPATI: King Govinda.

JAISING: King Govinda defied Mother Kali ?

RAGHUPATI: Defied you and me, all scriptures, all countries, all time, defied Mahakali, the Goddess of the endless stream of time—sitting upon that puny throne of his.

JAISING: King Govinda ?

RAGHUPATI: Yes, yes, your King Govinda, the darling of your heart. Ungrateful : I have given my love to bring you up, and yet King Govinda is dearer to you than I am.

JAISING: The child raises its arms to the full moon, sitting upon his father's lap. You are my father, and my full moon is King Govinda. Then is it true, what I hear from people, that our King forbids all sacrifies in the temple ? But in this we cannot obey him.

RAGHUPATI: Banishment is for him who does not obey.

JAISING: It is no calamity to be banished from a land where the Goddess Kali's worship remains incomplete. No, so

long as I live, the service of the temple shall be fully performed. (*They go out*).

In his rage, Raghupati tries to involve the king's brother, the Queen who seeks the Goddess' benediction to beget a son, the Commander-in-Chief and Jaising to plot the king's death and thereby secure royal blood in offering to the Goddess. Through devious logic he prevails upon the king's brother, Prince Nakshatra to draw the royal blood.

JAISING: What is it that I heard ? Merciful Mother, is it your bidding ? To ask brother to kill brother ? Master, how could you say that it was Mother's own wish ?

RAGHUPATI: There was no other means but this to serve my Goddess.

JAISING: Means ? Why means ? Mother, have you not your own sword to wield with your own hand ? Must your wish burrow underground, like a thief, to steal in secret ? Oh, the sin !

RAGHUPATI: What do you know about sin ?

JAISING: What I have learnt from you.

RAGHUPATI: Then come and learn your lesson once again from me. Sin has no meaning in reality. To kill is but to kill—it is neither sin nor anything else. Do you not know that the dust of this earth is made of countless killings ? Old Time is ever writing the chronicle of the transient life of creatures in letters of blood. Killing is in the wilderness, in the habitations of man, in bird's nests, in insects' holes, the sea, in the sky; there is killing for life, for sport, for nothing whatever. The world is ceaselessly killing; and the great

Goddess Kali, the spirit of ever-changing time, is standing with her thirsty tongue hanging down from her mouth, with her cup in hand, into which is running the red life-blood of the world, like juice from the crushed cluster of grapes.

JAISING: Stop, Master. Is, then, love a falsehood and mercy a mockery, and the one thing true, from beginning of time, the lust for destruction ? Would it not have destroyed itself long ago ? You are playing with my heart, my Master. Look there, she is gazing at me with her sweet mocking smile. My bloodthirsty Mother, wilt thou accept my blood ? Shall I plunge this knife into my breast and make an end to my life, as thy child, for evermore ? The life-blood flowing in these veins, is it so delicious to thee ? O my Mother, my bloodthirsty Mother ! — Master, did you call me ? I know you wanted my heart to break its bounds in pain overflowing my Mother's feet. This is the true sacrifice. But King's blood ! The Mother, who is thirsting for our love, you accuse of bloodthirstiness !

RAGHUPATI: Then let the sacrifice be stopped in the temple.

JAISING: Yes, let it be stopped—No, no, Master, you know what is right and what is wrong. The heart's laws are not the laws of scripture. Eyes cannot see with their own light—the light must come from the outside. Pardon me, Master, pardon my ignorance. Tell me, father, is it true that the Goddess seeks King's blood ?

RAGHUPATI: Alas, child, have you lost your faith in me ?

JAISING: My world stands upon my faith in you. If the Goddess must have the King's blood, let me bring it to her. I will never allow a brother to kill his brother.

RAGHUPATI: But there can be no evil in carrying out God's wishes.

JAISING: No, it must be good, and I will earn the merit of it.

RAGHUPATI: But my boy, I have reared you from your childhood, and you have grown close to my heart. I can never bear to lose you, by any chance.

JAISING: I will not let your love for me be soiled with sin. Release Prince Nakshatra from his promise.

The plot is discovered and Raghupati is banished. But before he leaves, in a climax, it is Jaising, the priest's foster-son, who immolates himself, his senses confused between right and wrong, faith and reason. Raghupati is shocked by the enormity of the consequence of his blind wrath into the truth that the Goddess is but the projection of man's own wilfulness and that she is no more than stone. He breaks the idol even as he rises to the heights of a tragic hero.

The greatness of *Visarjan* is not only in its relentless examination of the conflict of faith and reason, or as one critic put it, of institutionalised power and humanism, but also in Tagore's courage in seizing upon the idolatry and worship of the Goddess Kali whose hold upon Bengali religious sentiment is all-powerful to drive home this point. Few have practised such iconoclasm without coming to grief.

Visarjan's straightforwardness made it intelligible, even popular, among people. But *Raktakarabi (Red Oleanders)* which deals with a similar theme but in different vein and an even larger framework caused endless misunderstanding.

Tagore contemplated the material civilisation of the West with

its inherent contradictions and the crushing power of organised man aided by science over personal man on the one hand, and its interaction with the East on the other where the West presented itself as "a titanic power with an endless curiosity to analyse and know but without sympathy to understand, with numberless arms to coerce and acquire but no serenity of soul to realise and enjoy". And he felt called upon to deliver a passionate indictment of the abstractions of this gigantic system which are "obscure to us in the dark secrecy of their political laboratory and yet grimly concrete in their grasp upon our vitals".

To present this terrifying picture Tagore used allegory and symbolism as it has rarely been used in Indian, or for that matter any other, drama so that it became capable of several interpretations. He also couched this theme in language which without reading in depth made it almost incomprehensible.

The system is symbolised by an oligarchy of Sirdars or governors (more correctly, bosses), the political laboratory is the chamber wherein the oligarch, the King, sits in dark secrecy behind a wall of netting never seen till the very end. The grasp is upon a community of nameless persons who are known by numbers,* its grimly concrete manifestation the brutality by which they are worked in gold mines subject to no respite but ever exposed to savage punishment for the slightest infraction. In this

* BISHU: The calendar never records the last day. After the first day comes the second, after the second the third. There's no such thing as getting finished here. We're always digging—one yard, two yards, three yards. We go on raising gold nuggets—after one nugget another, then more and more and more. In Yaksha Town figures follow one another in rows and never arrive at any conclusion. That's why we are not men to them, but only numbers—Phagu, what is yours?

PHAGULAL: I'm No. 47 V.

BISHU: I'm 60 Ng.

arid, bleak world, the symbols of redemption are Nandini, a young woman who always wears a garland of red oleanders, and her lover Ranjan. Nandini and Ranjan symbolise the inspiration of life that not even the most refined oppression can wholly extinguish in man, the red oleanders that undefinable gift of the heart, so strong because so subtle and soft. The relationship between the king, Ranjan and Nandini are established by Tagore in the following :

VOICE: (of king): Do tell me what you think of me.

NANDINI: Have I not told you often enough ? I think you are wonderful. Strength swelling up in your arms, like rolling clouds before a storm—it makes my heart dance within me.

VOICE: And when your heart dances to see Ranjan, is that also—

NANDINI: Let that be,—you have no time.

VOICE: There is time—for this; only tell me, then go.

NANDINI: That dance rhythm is different, you won't understand.

VOICE: I will, I must understand.

NANDINI: I can't explain it clearly. Let me go.

VOICE: Tell me, at least, whether you like me.

NANDINI: Yes, I like you.

VOICE: The same as Ranjan ?

NANDINI: Again the same question ! I tell you you don't understand these things.

VOICE: I do understand, a little. I know what the difference is between Ranjan and me. In me there is only strength, in Ranjan there is magic.

NANDINI: What d'you mean by magic?

VOICE: Shall I explain? Underground there are blocks of stone, iron, gold—there you have the image of strength. On the surface grows the grass, the flower blossoms—there you have the play of magic. I can extract gold from the fearsome depths of secrecy, but to wrest that magic from the near at hand I fail.

NANDINI: You have no end of things, yet why always covet?

VOICE: All I possess is so much dead weight. No increase of gold can create a particle of a touchstone, no increase of power can ever come up to youth. I can only guard by force. If I had Ranjan's youth I could leave you free and yet hold you fast. My time is spent in knotting the binding rope, but, alas, everything else can be kept tied, except joy.

NANDINI: It is you who entangle yourself in your own net, then why keep on fretting?

VOICE: You will never understand. I, who am a desert, stretch out my hand, to you, a tiny blade of grass, and cry: I am parched, I am bare, I am weary. The flaming thirst of this desert licks up one fertile field after another, only to enlarge itself—it can never annex the life of the frailest of grasses.

NANDINI: One would never think you were so tired.

VOICE: One day, Nandini, in a far off land, I saw a mountain as weary as myself. I could not guess that all its stones were aching inwardly. One night I heard a noise, as if some giant's evil dream had moaned and moaned and suddenly snapped asunder. Next morning I found the mountain had disappeared in the chasm of a yawning earthquake. That

made me understand how overgrown power crushes itself inwardly by its own weight. I see in you something quite opposite.

NANDINI: What is it you see in me?

VOICE: The dance rhythm of the All.

NANDINI: I don't understand.

VOICE: The rhythm that lightens the enormous weight of matter. To that rhythm the bands of stars and planets go about dancing from sky to sky, like so many minstrel boys. It is that rhythm, Nandini, that makes you so simple, so perfect. How small you are compared to me, yet I envy you.

NANDINI: You have cut yourself off from everybody and so deprived yourself.

VOICE: I keep myself apart, that it may become easy for me to plunder the world's big treasure-houses. Nevertheless there are gifts that your little flower-like fingers can easily reach, but not all the strength of my body—gifts hidden in God's closed hand. That hand I must force open some day.

NANDINI: When you talk like that, I don't follow you. Let me go.

VOICE: Go then; but here, I stretch out this hand of mine from my window, place your hand on it for a moment.

NANDINI: Only a hand, and the rest of you hidden? It frightens me!

VOICE: Everybody flies from me because they only see my hand. But if I wished to hold you with all of me, would you come to me, Nandini?

NANDINI: Why talk like this when you wouldn't even let me come into your room?

VOICE: My busy time, overloaded with work, dragged along against obstruction, is not for you. On the day when you can arrive, full sail before the wind, come into the bosom of my full leisure, the hour of welcome will strike. Even if that wind be a storm, all will be well. That hour is not yet come.

NANDINI: Rajan will bring that delightful wind here, I tell you. He carries his holiday-time with him, even in his work.

VOICE: He has the red wine of oleanders to fill up his cup. But to me you want to pass on an empty leisure. Where is the wine?

NANDINI: Let me go now.

VOICE: Answer me first.

NANDINI: How to fulfil leisure you will learn from Ranjan. He is so beautiful.

VOICE: Beauty only responds to beauty. Its lute strings break when force tries to snatch an answer. But no more of this. Go, go away, or else there will be trouble.

NANDINI: I go. But I tell you, my Ranjan is coming today. You cannot prevent him. *(She goes.)*

The king lives behind his net fondly quarrying empty wealth and contemplating on eternal existence and believing that he is the source of all power. But as the play proceeds it gradually becomes clear that he is also no more than a prisoner of the Sirdars, of the system, and it is the system that rules. Finally when there is a revolt, the king himself leads it in the company of Nandini.

Although Tagore reached the zenith of symbolistic craftsmanship in *Raktakarabi,* it is *Raja (The King of the Dark Chamber)*

his first allegorical play which is more internationally known. In it Tagore tried to show that true beauty and, indeed, truth itself must be seen through its inmost quality and not its outer physical appearance. The king remains secreted in a dark chamber beyond the sight of men. Even his queen has not seen him though she yearns to, believing him to be handsome. The more the denial of the sight of him the more beautiful is the image which she conjures of him. The king, on her insistence, agrees to appear in a crowd and the queen is lured by her fantasy into picking on the wrong man. One day when he does at last reveal himself to her he turns out to be awesome and dark as the night. The queen is appalled beyond words but ends up with her perception cleared of all its delusions. "You are not handsome, my lord", she says, "you are incomparable", as they both go out into the light.

Dakghar (Post Office) has its overtones of spiritual symbolism but moving on a human level it is a touching, tender play which does not tax the mind—its symbolism can be entirely ignored —and is hence, perhaps, Tagore's most popular work. It tells of a dying boy who sees life's passing parade through the window of his bedroom. Among those who go by is the postman who he believes will bring him a letter from the king. Day after day he lies in hope of the letter as his life drains away. At last it arrives, or so he believes, brought by none other than the king's own physician who also releases him from this world's cares.

It has been said that the boy's passionate yearning for communion with the king can be interpreted in two ways : the mind's desire for the infinite or far-away, or the soul's desire for a great realisation.

We began by saying that Tagore was a paradox because in spite of this stature and output he is comparatively unfamiliar. He was a paradox in other ways too. Though he took in the best of the East and West, he followed his own particular way, aloof and isolated from everything around him. Yet again he was a reckonable factor both in culture and politics. But the movement in drama, as in other fields, which he began remained and ended with him. No one has tried or dared to carry on his tradition and in the continuum of Indian life Tagore is a unique, solitary, compelling, unavoidable phenomenon.

The Years of Repression

At about the time that Tagore was writing *Raktakarabi* there came upon the scene a man who was to change the fabric of every single Indian life, uprooting all kinds of settled beliefs and plunging the nation along ways of struggle unknown in history in man's quest of freedom. He was Gandhi.

With the coming of Mahatma Gandhi the national movement which was already restive and no longer interested in petitions to the British Government but thinking in wider terms of freedom took on a new, dynamic and popular base. Complete Independence became the battle-cry as Gandhiji unleashed a series of non-violent resistance movements against the imperialist regime. During the thirties these unique movements gathered large sections of the people at every level, theatre workers among them. The British Government's response, at first one of incredulity, soon gave way to uncompromising firmness. All kinds of expression were ruthlessly muzzled. Authors, poets, dramatists could write nothing which even remotely smacked

of criticism of British rule or of support to nationalist aspirations. Theatre as one of the most overt vehicles of expression involving large numbers of people received a crushing blow. Such theatre as could survive could only be escapist or palpably unreal, the few gropings toward purpose having been snuffed out.

It was tragically in this epoch that a *coup de grace* was very nearly delivered to theatre in India from an entirely different source—the cinema. The cinema came to India—as the "bioscope"—sometime in mid-1898. The early shows were occasional, sporadic and various, screened in tents and consisted of foreign "moving" pictures. By the first decade of our century they had left the tents for more permanent habitation in the big cities—unfortunately what were once playhouses. In 1913 Dadasaheb Phalke presented the first complete and successful Indian film *Harishchandra*. Phalke's shrewd choice of theme drawn from one of the most cherished episodes of Indian mythology acquired overnight thousands of fans for this new medium. Over the years the film acted as a magnet on the masses but when the first Indian sound film *Alam Ara* was produced by Ardeshir Irani in 1931 it sounded the death-knell not only of the silent film but unconsciously of the theatre. The talkie hit the theatre in three ways. In destroying the universality of the silent film and exposing the kaleidoscope of languages in India it encouraged, however, the diversification of the industry in the country. Existing theatres of legitimate drama were taken over one by one for the film so that in time drama was driven to halls and tents to perform in makeshift conditions. And cruellest of all, actors and actresses, and in some cases entire theatre companies, began migrating to this popular, lucrative

field. This was especially true of Maharashtra where even Marathi playwrights deserted the theatre to become screenplay writers.

It is interesting to note that in the West the debacle brought about by the film was not so complete and actors and actresses still won their spurs in legitimate drama before going on to films.

However, the back of the movement was not totally broken. Its spirit lingered on.

Dance-Drama Carries on

Ballet and dance-drama oddly enough began making a breakthrough in this period, perhaps because of its firmer traditional base and its less chequered continuity; perhaps because in times of travail people look back to their heritage to seek solace and new ways of fulfilment.

This was the time when intense study and research and rediscovery was made of the great dance-drama forms—*Kathak, Kathakali, Bharat Natyam* and *Manipuri*—whose far-reaching effects were to extend into the period after Independence. Three stars shine brightly on the firmament.

Menaka took *Kathak,* the northern dance form which had degenerated into a common 'nautch' fit only for dancing girls and harlots, and restored it to its pristine greatness transmuting it in the process with her own inventive genius. *Kathak* is the only dance form which uses mime and gesture but does not require special knowledge of its idiom and language to comprehend it. Menaka studied *Kathak, Kathakali* and *Manipuri* under five great masters of the art. She also had the advantage of

familiarity with Russian ballet counting among her friends none other than the great Anna Pavlova. Armed with this knowledge and a highly trained corps-de-ballet she produced a number of works culminating in the dance-drama *Malvikagnimitra* based on Kalidasa's Sanskrit play. In this dance-drama she incorporated the four main classical dance styles. Not the least contribution Menaka made was to emphasise the totality of presentation as a spectacle with the most elegant integration of decor, costume and music. With her repertoire she captivated national and international audiences till death claimed her in 1947. Recent dance-drama productions of two other Kalidasa works *Kumara-Sambhava* and *Malati-Madhav* by Brij Mohan Maharaj owe much of their success to the pioneering zest of Menaka in projecting *Kathak* into this form.

At the same time Uday Shankar was exploding on the scene with daring innovations in ballet. With a heterodoxical abandon which characterised all his work Uday Shankar pioneered modern Indian ballet employing his undoubted genius in blending whatever elements he could find to suit his purpose. He synthesised dance styles bringing out their expressive possibilities, gave dramatic purpose and significance to the orchestra which under his inspiration acquired dimensions unknown in Indian music, converted traditional costumes and masks to make them dramatically alive, and chiselled his corps in dazzling ensemble work. Like Menaka he was a friend of Pavlova and had even worked and danced with her in a *Radha-Krishna* ballet. He did not hesitate to use Western concepts in his work. With a tremendous flair for showmanship and a tingling vibrant personality he stormed all Asia and the West, bringing into theatre some of its greatest moments of magic. But he appalled the

purists and the orthodox with his ultra-modernism even though Tagore hailed him for his genius in creating in a limitless field new forms of living beauty. There was no gainsaying that his ballets including his tour-de-force *Shiv-Parvati* held audiences spell-bound and that he had made a positive contribution to the theatre arts.

Uday Shankar's rich inventiveness took him later into experiment with contemporary themes in folk and classical idioms notably in *Rhythm of Life* and *Labour and Machinery*, one dealing with the patterns of man's existence in contemporary society, and the other the exploitation of villagers by traders and the conversion of man into an automation under the deadening demands of the machine. Once again Uday Shankar outraged the purists but of his creativeness there was no doubt. The restless spark that motivated him from his earliest days when he danced without training and out of sheer urge was not yet quenched. Uday Shankar went on to producing an extraordinary shadow-play *Renunciation* based on the life of the Buddha whose notable quality was not only the controlled use of perspective shadow but also that the shadows themselves were coloured. His latest great work was the dance-drama *Samanya Kshati*, based on a Tagore poem in which he used spectacular abstractions on colour slides projected on the cyclorama to heighten the dramatic intensity of the story.

Rukminidevi Arundale in South India in the thirties pioneered in the use of the traditional solo dance form *Bharata Natyam* for dance-drama and ballet. Her outstanding contribution in nearly three decades of work was the setting of Kalidasa's *Kumara-Sambhav* as a dance-drama with interpretative song. Her other productions include the Radha-Krishna love story, *Gita-*

Govind by Jayadeva and *Ramayana* based on the epic poem. Rukminidevi liberated *Bharata Natyam* from its cloister in temples where only a certain class of dancing girls were allowed to perform this dance. Belonging as she did to high society in South India her entry into *Bharata Natyam* and on public stage jolted people but effectively opened the dance to wider fulfilment.

A Peoples' Theatre is Born

By 1937 Mahatma Gandhi's non-violent battles had yielded one fruit of transition. The British Government agreed to part with power in limited spheres in the provinces of India. Popular governments were elected with overwhelming majorities though the ultimate power still vested with the British through their governors in the provinces and the Viceroy in New Delhi. But even this limited exercise in autonomy was short-lived when the confrontation in Europe between the fascist forces and the West exploded in World War II and India was committed to it without popular consultation or approval. The Indian National Congress which spearheaded the freedom movement and which, in fact, controlled almost all the provincial ministries, had always been one with anti-fascism from the earliest days through the Spanish Civil War and the Japanese attack on China. It had maintained an internationalist outlook largely through Jawaharlal Nehru. It sympathised with the world anti-fascist struggle but as Gandhiji said, a slave India could not enthuse about democracy only for its masters. Ideally a free India would fight shoulder to shoulder with democratic forces but, he said, India would cooperate even in bondage if the war aims included In-

dia's eventual independence. This, the British were unwilling to recognise. The popular governments resigned and repression was renewed. The British looked upon India as a vast magazine and granary from which to draw supplies to sustain their war machine whether the Indians were willing or not. As the war progressed two unconnected developments affected the fortunes of theatre in India. Following a renewed struggle led by Gandhi which was ruthlessly put down, in Bengal, depleted by war needs and exigencies, a famine struck carrying away nearly two million souls. And Germany had attacked the Soviet Union.

The Soviet entry into the War caused in India, as much as in the rest of the world, an acute crisis in the minds of thinking people and in the political forces. Till then the war had been considered a clash between fascism and imperialism. But the new development brought about an entirely new character to it. It created an emotional contradiction for many Indians because the Soviet Union was not fighting alone but in alliance with the West. Sympathy for socialism of which the U.S.S.R. was only an ideal, and antipathy for imperialism of which Britain was an immediate presence could not be reconciled in India's attitude to the new war situation. Nationalist considerations would tend to override internationalism. On the political plane there was disruption among the left elements; and between the nationalists who comprised all shades of opinion and the communists there was a sharp cleavage. On the cultural plane some sort of unity persisted. The non-communists who were unwilling to compromise with imperialism were, however, prepared to support the Soviet struggle against fascism. The communists tried to capitalise on this and among the many fronts of possible unity they created was one on theatre—it was called the Indian People's

Theatre Association. It is not clear and probably never will be, whether the I.P.T.A. as it was called, was born of a positive directive of the Communist Party of India, or whether it came about through the anti-fascism of the war years with some remote identity with the international artistic movement of progressive forces, analogous to the Moscow Art Theatre, the Group Theatre of U.S.A. and the Little Theatre of Britain. Certain it is that the I.P.T.A. drew in a remarkable cross-section of the most talented and progressive people irrespective of political affiliation or interest— people like Sombhu Mitra, Shanti Bardhan, Ravi Shankar, Mulk Raj Anand, Romesh Thapar, Sachin Shankar, Narendra Sharma, Khwaja Ahmad Abbas, and Balraj Sahni who in subsequent years were to enrich the cultural landscape in many other ways. Since the I.P.T.A. aimed to be a popular movement targetted not toward a few upper-crust sections of society but the broad masses of the people, and for this purpose encouraged the study and use of folk forms and directness and simplicity of presentation, it was not only novel but even exhilarating.

The I.P.T.A. opened on a muted note and although groups and "squads" were formed they functioned without causing more than a ripple. But the Bengal Famine of 1943 which sent a wave of horror throughout the country and as much an intense desire to help that unfortunate province, provided a capital issue and the I.P.T.A. seized upon it. Thousands of artistes and intellectuals flocked under its banner. Bands of actors, singers, dancers went round the country performing in aid of famine relief. Branches sprouted everywhere and a countrywide movement began.

In Bengal, Sombhu Mitra produced a play *Nabanna (Rich Harvest),* in Bombay Khwaja Ahmad Abbas produced a film

Dharti ke Lal (Children of the Earth), both moving documents on the famine. Companies experimented not only in indigenous folk-forms adapted to contemporary issues but even with the works of Western progressive writers like Clifford Odets whose *Waiting for Lefty* set in an Indian context was produced by Mulk Raj Anand. The tour-de-force of the I.P.T.A. was Shanti Bardhan's ballet *India Immortal,* enlarged on the success of an earlier work, *The Spirit of India.* Shanti Bardhan, a choreographer, who belonged to Uday Shankar's Ballet Centre gathered round him a versatile team including the dancers Sachin Shankar and Narendra Sharma, the drummer Abani Dasgupta and the musician Ravi Shankar. *India Immortal* was taken round the country electrifying crowds everywhere, and carrying the I.P.T.A. to its crest.

In after years when Shanti Bardhan had cut adrift from the I.P.T.A. he went on breaking new ground with his *Discovery of India* based on Jawaharlal Nehru's book, the *Ramayana* a novel ballet danced in puppet style and *Panchatantra,* the Indian classic of fables, in which bird and animal movements were mimicked in a creative style, the invention of Bardhan himself. His death ended an extraordinary theatrical inventiveness but he left behind the world-famous Little Ballet Troupe formed with his wife Gul.

With the end of the World War II, the polarisation of ideologies, and the Independence of India, the I.P.T.A. lost its *raison d'etre.* It soon became an open instrument of the Communist Party and racked with sectarian and dogmatic influences. Its finest elements left in droves and the I.P.T.A. cracked. Only a shadow remains. Its importance in history lies in the fact that it could in its heyday gather so many diverse elements, hold the

vision of a new theatrical expression of our times and provide the battle school for the makers of today's theatre.

The Indian National Theatre

During the Quit India movement launched by Gandhi in 1942, a number of theatre workers who were also in the national campaign and consequently in jail conceived the idea of a nationwide theatre which was later formed as the Indian National Theatre. Its aims were consciously to establish new traditions and standards seeking inspiration from the past and utilising the techniques of the present. The I.N.T.'s first major production was *Discovery of India* and the organisation really came into its own after Independence. Today it has a network spread all over the country with its strongest unit in Bombay which has put out a remarkably prolific crop of plays, ballets, dance-dramas, folk dances and drama festivals. It maintains a workshop and an impressario department handles foreign productions playing in India.

The Phenomenon of Prithviraj

The dragon-seed of communal division and national disintegration which the British had so assiduously sown throughout their hold on India began yielding its most bitter harvest as the war years drew to their close. In the early era of imperial rule, the British believing, wrongly, that the Muslims of India were the natural heirs of the Mughal Empire suppressed them and encouraged the Hindus. But later as national consciousness found expression in the freedom movement the British believing, again

wrongly, that it was Hindu-inspired, reversed the process. In any case the classic tactic of imperialism would have required some form of divide and rule. Its application in India led to the encouragement of all kinds of real or trumped up interests staking claims for national recognition so that at no time could it appear that the country was united in seeking an end of foreign domination. The extraordinary outcome of this policy was to give rise to a concept against all logic and polity that the Muslims formed a separate nation and that no free India could exist which was not divided along religious lines. This concept concretised by the name Pakistan began as an idealistic expression, then became a wishful dream and finally turned into a nightmarish possibility. A series of ugly communal incidents rocked the country and the ideals of national unity, racial and religious amity, domestic concord to which all sections of the people irrespective of their creed were dedicated began crumbling under the onslaught of reactionary forces which were bent upon cleaving the country apart. The British realised when the war ended that their position in India was fast becoming untenable and that the Frankestein's monster they had raised was turning upon themselves. In this situation there arose a remarkable dramatic group called Prithvi Theatres. It was the product of two visions—the vision of an individual and the vision of an idealism.

Prithviraj the individual was a man of ample means and fame. He had the adulation of millions through the films in which he acted. Yet he turned his back on films to set up a professional theatre company because he believed that the theatre would give him, beyond the film, the immediate contact with the people for the idealism and purpose he wished to convey. With a composite cast covering all elements of Indian society—his leading lady was

the beautiful Muslim, Uzra Mumtaz—and a repertoire of seven plays Prithviraj went barnstorming the country.

The play *Deewar (Wall)* depicted the wall created between two brothers by a foreign seductress and the bitterness and enmity which ensued till a revolution brought down the wall and restored unity and faith.

Pathan dealt with Hindu-Muslim unity brought about in mutual blood-sacrifice; *Gaddar* the innocent plight of abandoned miniorities; and *Ahuti* the fate of the abducted girl on her return home. The other plays had social and economic overtones.

One may cavil that these plays were melodramatic and propagandistic. But then Prithviraj was fiercely partisan and to be purposeful is in a sense to be propagandistic. Certainly those supercharged times were not occasions for polite objectivity. The point is that he was partisan on the right side of values, and his object was to jolt the nation from the stupor in which it was allowing those values and ideals to die helplessly.

If Prithvi Theatres stands as a milestone it is because the phenomenal public response to it showed the magnetic power of ideas and the strength of the theatre which deals with acute contemporary problems. The influence of the company upon the course of events was of little consequence, however. Rarely is it given to an artist or to theatre to alter the course of history. From the cataclysm of the partition of India Prithvi Theatres emerged with passion spent to pass into decline and out.

9

Toward High Noon

In 1947, the British realising the grim reality that the days of Empire were numbered, accelerated their departure from the Indian subcontinent, divided the land into India and Pakistan and quit. The country lay prostrate with this unnatural partition. It was for Indians a sombre moment of triumph and tragedy. While Nehru stood at the midnight hour to proclaim India's tryst with destiny, Gandhi turned his back upon the seat of new power to wander alone among the distant villages to soothe, assuage and salve the wounds of partition. Even the qualified sense of exhilaration at being free was soon submerged by the horrendous catastrophe that swept the country as populations in their millions exchanged places in history's greatest and bloodiest mass migration.

The effect of this apalling event was to numb the intellectual and creative capacity of Indian minds. No response seemed meaningful enough to interpret the horror of the times. The forces of reaction seemed let loose everywhere and Mahatma Gandhi's assassination froze the country. It was a time of intense heart-searching. As in each epoch of India's long history, in

times of travail when a world had ended and a new one was yet to be born men tried to reach into the past for an introspective look into the solid foundations and values of their culture and heritage to find the courage to move forward again.

And so it is that we find in the post-Independence era the dominant upsurge was in the direction of association and understanding of heritage. But at the same time in conditions of freedom this association was linked with the desire to experiment with and exploit new emerging values and techniques to make the past meaningful in terms of the present.

A number of remarkable developments along these lines took place. Some have already been mentioned in passing earlier like Shanti Bardhan's *Discovery of India, Ramayana* and *Panchatantra,* Uday Shankar's new genre of ballet and Sombhu Mitra's new interpretation of Tagore's *Raktakarabi.*

To this must be added some exciting experiments in the use of folk-forms in theatre. There was a production of *Heer Ranjha,* a folk-classic romantic tragedy of the Punjab reinterpreted in opera by Shiela Bhatia for the Delhi Art Theatre, a phenomenal and new experience in contemporary theatre. Dina Gandhi in Ahmedabad staged *Mena Gujari* a local legend as a musical play in the folk-form of Gujarat called *Bhavai.* In Delhi with the vigorous inspiration of Begum Qudsia Zaidi, the Hindustani Theatre tried out *Shakuntala* once in stylised form in a new translation produced by Moneecka Tanvir and again as a dance-drama by Narendra Sharma. It also made an experiment with Shudraka's *Little Clay Cart* in a neo-folk style called *Naunautanki* under the direction of a talented man of theatre, Habib Tanvir.

All over India the classical dance and dance-drama came into

its own. Not only were *Kathakali* and *Bharata Natyam* greatly in favour but old forms like *Kuchipudi, Odissi, Yakshagana, Jatra, Bhagavata Mela Natakam, Bhama-Kalapam, Rasaleela,* the Chou Masked dances of Seraikella were rediscovered and revived. A whole new corps of beautiful dancers like Indrani Rehman, Yamini Krishnamurti, Kamla Laxman, Mrinalini Sarabhai and the durable virtuoso, Balasaraswati, shot to international fame. Indrani Rehman and Mrinalini Sarabhai ventured out into innovations in the classical dance. Mrinalini Sarabhai with her Darpana School in Ahmedabad broke away from tradition in a dance-drama *Manushya (The Life of Man)* which while essentially using the *Kathakali* medium yet had entirely new movements and gestures to deal with birth and childhood. Recently in an interpretation of a vedic hymn, she stretched out even further in an incognisable dance form, Indian yet strongly in line with some of the finest in avant-garde Western dance. Even the music, appropriately, was composed in a *concrète* idiom.

These experiments got a small hello from purists but they showed that the restless urge to strike towards new frontiers while respecting old country was on the move again.

As once before in the past the Indian theatre looked out to take a world-view. But this time it was with more serious purpose. With greater idealism and dedication and a sturdier intellectual fibre and curiosity a whole new group of directors brought to Indian audiences such a wide diversity of Western theatre as Ibsen, Strindberg, Chekhov, Lorca, Anouilh, Cocteau, Camus, Giradoux, Eliot, Fry, Becket, Ionesco, Albee, Miller, Tennessee Williams, Sartre and Brecht. Many of these directors skilfully exploited Western technical know-how and ideas of design and

presentation in imaginative and polished productions.

In the early forties in Bombay a young prodigy, Sultan Padamsee, with a passionate dedication to theatre had gathered together a group to stage some extremely daring productions of *Macbeth, Othello* and *Salome* employing original and unorthodox techniques, decor and lighting. Like all pioneers Padamsee earned a lot of criticism for his non-conformism and he died in 1946 at the age of 23. But he had set in motion an extraordinary group of people, Ebrahim Alkazi, Jean Bhownagary, Adi Marzban, Hamid Sayani, Alyque Padamsee and Derryc Jeffereis, all of whom went their separate ways but made a pronounced impact on some aspect or other of the Indian theatre movement.

Alkazi, a gifted actor and sensitive producer, set up a Theatre Unit in Bombay whose productions were notable for their economy and imagination of design and creativity of expression. From his Unit emerged a number of talented young actors and actresses bearing the hallmark of his individualistic method acting. Alkazi later went to the National School of Drama in Delhi where he has used his undoubted talents to enlarge the content and tone of teaching and production. Among his latest productions have been two experiments, entirely successful, of modern treatment of classical themes: one, a production of *King Lear* in Urdu and the other, an open air production of *Andha Yug (The Blind Age),* an episode from the *Mahabharata* reinterpreted by Dharmvir Bharati in Hindi, staged against the battlements of a ruined fort in Delhi.

Adi Marzban, on the other hand, in a life of versatile theatre interests, has concentrated on light, frothy comedies most of them written and directed by himself. Marzban who says he cannot bear pomposity and has no message to give the world

has written over 20 plays in less than two decades working sometimes on three or four scripts at the same time. Like Romesh Mehta and his Three Arts Club in Delhi, who has written and produced a number of comedies exposing present-day foibles and pretensions, Marzban's is the theatre of no consequence but what they have both done is to create a large and loyal following for theatre, an important contribution in keeping the movement alive.

Derryc Jeffereis who works with the Theatre Group, Bombay, is one of the few specialists on creative lighting and consequently has been called in for his advice on all significant occasions in theatre development. Jeffereis is joined with Tapas Sen in Bengal who has carried the technological virtuosity of lighting to formidable lengths, almost to a fault, in the plays *Angar (Black Diamonds)* and *Setu (Bridge)*, in bringing about a great awareness of this otherwise neglected aspect of theatre presentation. Tapas Sen, an entirely self-made man, squandered part of his youth in uncreative activity in the engineering service of the Public Works Department in Delhi. But later under the inspiration of an art teacher he turned to the theatre and found his forte in lighting and scenic effects.

Sometime in 1949, a group of young intellectuals in Delhi calling themselves the Unity Theatre broke the sterile hold of English drawing-room comedies chiefly produced by British diplomatic personnel by daring to stage Cocteau's *The Eagle Has Two Heads*. The unexpectedly enthusiastic public response opened up the possibilities of other works previously considered beyond the receptivity of the capital's audiences. A number of serious producers belonging to this group as well as others like the persistent Little Theatre Group and Theatre Workshop thus

had the chance to offer the more significant of European and American works extending up to the avant-garde Becket, Ionesco and Pinter. The continuing public enthusiasm allowed even the emergence of a very successful experimental week-end repertory called Yatrik whose work under the untiring leadership of Joy Michael has embraced plays in both English and Hindustani. Joy Michael, who studied at the British Drama League and LAMDA, has had a long career of acting and production and above all a passionate zeal to promote the theatre movement.

The only obstacle that has held back Yatrik and perhaps others from either emerging or remaining viable is the acute shortage of small theatres and theatre facilities. This, indeed, is one of the greatest problems of theatre in India as a whole. Many ambitious plans, some executed and others in the offing, to build theatres all over the country envisage large, and often ill-designed, structures. Most of them are unlikely to be used effectively because of the high rental. Yatrik has shown that what would be useful is a number of small intimate theatres dotting neighbourhoods and easily accessible to both theatre companies and audiences. The very lively Marathi theatre movement, particularly in Bombay, for instance, which is driven into wedding halls and tents could happily make use of such theatres.

It is in Bengal, perhaps, that the most sustained and significant effort has been made to enlarge the view of theatre. This may seem a strange statement when we consider that instead of a plethora of foreign plays produced by a large number of groups, in Bengal there have been only a few. But the important distinction is that unlike most other places they have been rendered into Bengali and not done in English and have consequently made a wider impact. Also there has been more

attention to craftsmanship and finesse.

Sombhu Mitra, for instance, has produced for his Bohurupee group Ibsen, Sophocles and other masters in *An Enemy of the People, Doll's House,* which drew excited interest, and *Oedipus Rex.* Utpal Dutt, whose acquaintance with European theatre is more than passing has done a sensitive version of Gorki's *Lower Depths.* The I.P.T.A. has tried out Gogol's *Revisor,* the Theatre Unit Katayev's *Squaring The Circle* and Kushilab Sartre's *La P . . . . Respecteuse.* There has also been a production of *Waiting for Godot,* although these later plays have not invited much enthusiasm.

The contemporary theatre in Bengal, although often spoken of with much self-disparagement by some Bengalis themselves, is nevertheless the most important and most hopeful movement in India. It is the only state in which a professional theatre has persisted with tenacity and where the amateur theatre has the chance of transforming itself into semi-professional and professional. The professional theatre which has thrived on plays or adaptations of Bengal's durable writers like Bankim Chandra and Sarat Chandra was challenged by a new generation of serious theatre workers like Sombhu Mitra and his talented wife Tripti, Utpal Dutt, Ajitesh Bannerjee and Tarun Roy. Sombhu Mitra is undoubtedly one of the greatest creative forces in Indian theatre today. In person a quiet, contemplative, unassuming man he is transformed when at work both as producer and actor. Suddenly he emerges with authority and command, a dominating presence, with a probing depth and understanding and the ability to interpret a play with astonishing clarity and vigour. The new theatre was helped not only by the sterling quality of such leadership but also because the Bengali public has supported

it in its quest for better theatre. Utpal Dutt's *Angar (Black Diamonds),* dealing with a colliery explosion and the plight of men caught in the mesh of circumstances, greed and pitilessness, ended only after a five-year run. His later play *Titash Ekti Nadir Nam (A River Named Titash)* based on a novel by Advaita Malla Barman and concerned with lives of a fishing community by an East Bengal river is perhaps the forerunner of a new total theatre. This also has had tremendous popular appeal. A play *Setu* which was a tour-de-force in acting for Tripti Mitra ended after one thousand and eightytwo performances. The result of this response has influenced the professional theatre greatly and should in the long run raise it to a more artistic plane.

This optimistic state of affairs cannot be said to be evident in other parts of the country. The professional theatre where it exists as in Bombay, and Madras like the Seva Stage, has not succeeded in casting its moorings off the archaic, flamboyant, shoddy style of the early twenties; nor in content has it been able to move on. The main burden has thus fallen on the amateur movement to cater to the undoubted national interest in theatre.

It is customary, even fashionable, to pour ridicule on amateur drama. But few who examine this movement objectively would deny the contribution it has made to the advancement of the theatre. Led by dedicated and enthusiastic, and possibly hopelessly misguided, lovers of drama the amateur movement has often found it possible to ignore those economic and mass-taste considerations which rule the professional theatre, and engage in bold experimentation, with no comfort of profit and every risk of calumny. The vigorous amateur theatre movement in India, which has stepped into the stage so ignominiously deserted by the professional, is confined chiefly to the middle and up-

per middle class. The output of this movement has not always attained outstanding merit. Nevertheless it has kept the spark of theatre alive. The popular conception that amateurs are a neighbourhood group of pests with pretensions has been exploded. Many groups act almost as though their operation is professional for that is their only viable approach. In recent times several groups have found courage to venture into difficult or controversial plays on an experimental level. More attention is paid to form, decor, lighting, music and other accessories hitherto considered only incidental. The results have often reached unexpected and outstanding levels. Of course the vanguard of this movement has lamentably been chiefly in the English language groups. But increasingly the pace set by them has been taken up by others so that there is no doubt that in time not only will the entire movement grasp the finesse and true craftsmanship of production but may well become the springboard for a more enduring professional theatre of the future.

As these developments were taking place the Government in an effort to assist the theatre movement set up a Song and Drama Academy called the Sangeet Natak Akademi. But long before this body came into existence voluntary agencies were already in the field to help and sustain the movement. One of these is the Bharatiya Natya Sangh, a non-profit federal organisation of all the theatre groups throughout the country. At its head is a rather remarkable woman Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, who in a lifetime devoted to theatre and the arts had first started out in the early decades of the century by shocking the Karnatak in the South by appearing publicly on the stage. Her great beauty was an added asset to the new movement of women in theatre which she initiated.

TOWARD HIGH NOON

In the context of the limited philanthropical sources in India it is obviously impossible for voluntary bodies to raise the massive funds required to give a real boost to the theatre movement in so large and complex a country. Despite these serious limitations the Bharatiya Natya Sangh has managed to set up training institutions, research and study programmes in folk and traditional theatre forms, assistance to students for foreign travel and study. It has even projected the Indian theatre at the international level through the International Theatre Institute.

10

Tomorrow

SURVEYING THE BROAD vista of the two-thousand-year history of Indian theatre and its journey through high moment and low, lost sometimes through trackless or hostile territory and re-emerging again today, an observer in contrasting old glories with the achievements of the present is apt to take a wholly dismal view of the future. This is reinforced by comparison with other countries, notably the West whose developing theatre is constantly within the consciousness of the Indian. However, I believe this view is both unduly pessimistic and erroneous.

When we speak of the Indian theatre of today we are really referring to the theatre after Independence. For though elements of it are hangovers from pre-Independence a watershed lies on 1947 when a world ended for India and new values and attitudes were reared. Thus we are examining a nineteen-year span—and this is too short for any final judgment. There is, on the whole, a tendency to minimise the efforts that have gone into this crucial period. Partly this is because we are too immediately close to and involved in our times to get a true perspective of those around us. There is, to my mind, no doubt that many people

who are contemporaneous with us have made a profound contribution to the revival of the theatre and who will one day be looked upon as the new pioneers and geniuses. To take a parallel we tend to think of Phalke as a genius of Indian cinema and yet to his contemporaries he did not seem so. The films of the thirties which were reviled are now looked upon with nostalgia for their quality! How nearness distorts. Most of the examples of contemporary theatre in the preceding Chapter have carried the theatre movement a step forward and laid the groundwork for the future. This is not as lavish a praise as it may seem when we consider the conditions in which this movement has fought for a place in the sun.

As we have seen the contemporary Indian theatre movement is largely amateur and largely left to its own devices. To equate this theatre with the professional Western theatre and expect one to come up to the standard of the other is to ask for the impossible. Then again this theatre, with no significant assistance from the State, is supposed to stand on its own legs. The staggering costs of an opera like Sheila Bhatia's *Heer Ranjha* have to be met solely through amateur effort—a grotesque proposition nonetheless achieved and hence truly heroic. And yet when we consider the situation in the West we find that the powerful theatre there rests on private, municipal or State patronage. The Schauspielhaus, the Burg Theatre, national theatre and opera would vanish but for this support. If even the free enterprise society of Western Europe accepts State support as normal for the theatre how much more valid is it in India's socialist-oriented situation? The fact is that in such a society the support from individuals and voluntary agencies dwindles rapidly as socialism advances. Voluntary agencies themselves tend to extinction. It

is the State that has to come to the rescue. I do not imply thereby that the State should *control* theatre. The experience of other countries shows that support from public authority need not compromise artistic standards or courage. But obviously there has to be a greater awareness that in a developing society, the emphasis on cultural advancement must be nearly as great as on economic progress if that society is to fulfil itself.

In other ways, too, the experience of other countries will show how hopeful the factors are in India. After the classic period, theatre disappeared from Western culture and when it did re-appear after the Dark Ages it did not immediately have vitality or purpose. And when it did begin to be established it still remained the preserve of an exclusive class. Its significant impact upon large masses of people is comparatively recent. In Britain, for example, it remained the entertainment of the elite even between the two World Wars. The levelling of the classes after World War II brought an influx of people from working class origins like John Osborne, Arnold Wesker, Harold Pinter, and Shelagh Delaney. Their acute awarness of contemporary issues and their explosive desire to articulate took the British theatre to a sense of purpose and also to a wide audience willing to see and hear.

The cinema has no doubt been a force in weakening theatre, but there is no evidence anywhere that it has dealt a death-blow. On the contrary the impersonal two dimentional image of the screen has never been a substitute for the warm, flesh-and-blood communion across the footlights that is theatre, and the fascination for theatre remains strong. The fear that all-pervasive television might displace theatre has astonishingly proved quite the reverse. The European experience is that television has, in fact, stimulated interest in theatre in sections of society which

had hitherto kept away from it. This is perhaps because the much-maligned television, though two-dimensional, is a much more immediate experience than the film. A play, a good play, on television has an inexplicable warm feel as it comes across in one's living room. It is also an unusual fact that a film on television remains flat while a play on television has depth and dimension though both appear on the same flat screen on the television set.

The success of theatre in Europe rests also largely on the fact that outstanding and significant works in any one language are immediately translated and available in every other European language. Thus the repertoire is large and constantly renewed. India lags lamentably in this and, perhaps, if plays were, in fact, translated all the time there would be a greater incentive to write for an entire country rather than one part of it; producers in turn would have a larger choice of selection. It is, necessary, I think, to consider India as really a country of countries where a national theatre would actually be a composition of "language-national" theatres each developing in its own right but always enriching others.

Indian society which has suffered jolts and shocks over centuries is now in that state of transition which should eventually place it on a more stable and less disparate social, intellectual and economic base. Such a transformed society will have the means and the willingness to sustain the theatre. It is then that the search for form, the groping for content, the exploration for style, the probing for idiom and the quest of the true dramatic image will end, and the efforts of today will have meaning tomorrow.

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